

## All Things Belong

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/37249237) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/37249237>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Mature</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">No Archive Warnings Apply</a>
Categories:	<a href="#">F/M</a> , <a href="#">M/M</a>
Fandoms:	<a href="#">陈情令   The Untamed (TV)</a> , <a href="#">魔道祖师 - 墨香铜臭   Módào Zǔshī - Mòxiāng Tóngxiù</a>
Relationships:	<a href="#">Wei Ying   Wei Wuxian &amp; Wen Ruohan</a> , <a href="#">Lan Zhan   Lan Wangji/Wei Ying   Wei Wuxian</a> , <a href="#">Wei Ying   Wei Wuxian &amp; Wen Ning   Wen Qionglin</a> , <a href="#">Jiang Cheng   Jiang Wanyin &amp; Wei Ying   Wei Wuxian</a> , <a href="#">Jiang Yanli &amp; Wei Ying   Wei Wuxian</a> , <a href="#">Jiang Fengmian &amp; Wei Ying   Wei Wuxian</a>
Characters:	<a href="#">Wen Ruohan</a> , <a href="#">Wei Ying   Wei Wuxian</a> , <a href="#">Wen Ning   Wen Qionglin</a> , <a href="#">Wen Qing (Modao Zushi)</a> , <a href="#">Wen Xu (Modao Zushi)</a> , <a href="#">Wen Chao (Modao Zushi)</a> , <a href="#">Jiang Cheng   Jiang Wanyin</a> , <a href="#">Jiang Yanli</a> , <a href="#">Jiang Fengmian</a> , <a href="#">Yu Ziyuan</a> , <a href="#">Lan Zhan   Lan Wangji</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Wei Ying   Wei Wuxian is a Wen</a> , <a href="#">Abuse</a> , <a href="#">Whipping</a> , <a href="#">Manipulations</a> , <a href="#">Warning: Wen Ruohan</a> , <a href="#">Smart Wei Ying   Wei Wuxian</a> , <a href="#">Possessive Behavior</a> , <a href="#">Warning: Jin Guangshan</a> , <a href="#">Implied/Referenced Rape/Non-con</a> , <a href="#">Past Rape/Non-con</a> , <a href="#">Society Level Victim Blaming</a> , <a href="#">Victim Blaming</a> , <a href="#">Translations Welcome</a>
Language:	English
Collections:	<a href="#">Best</a> , <a href="#">Pay Attention</a> , <a href="#">Heavenly Treasury</a> , <a href="#">Alternative Universes of Fandoms I enjoy</a> , <a href="#">Ashes' Library</a> , <a href="#">💫 Lan Wangji Wei Wuxian &amp; A-Yuan are a happy family 💫 (featuring Defan Wen)</a> , <a href="#">Catherine's Favorite Fics</a> , <a href="#">Mo Dao Zu Shi</a> , <a href="#">ChnsNvl</a> , <a href="#">Insp</a> , <a href="#">Books Read - Not Completed (GMODC)</a> , <a href="#">Модао</a>
Stats:	Published: 2022-02-20 Completed: 2024-10-16 Words: 92,963 Chapters: 7/7

# All Things Belong

by [kuroi\\_atropos](#)

## Summary

At a discussion conference, Wen Ruohan sees a face that he'd thought lost to the impenetrability of Baoshan Sanren's mountain.

He will not lose something so precious again.

Not when being a Grandfather suits him so well, and his Grandson is as wonderful as Wei Wuxian.

## Notes

Inspired by A Songbird at Dawn by mondengel - which seriously is the fic I didn't know that I needed. I had to re-read it like five times, lol. Seriously go read it, it's awesome!

AN: Before the XxXxXVvVvVXxXxXVvVvV is the modified version of the original fic.

- Translation into Русский available: [Все вещи принадлежат](#) by [PolinaGaer](#)
- Inspired by [Restricted Work] by [mondengel](#)

# Chapter One

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Wen Ruohan had primarily hosted this discussion conference to finalize his assessment of whether the other sects would cause him trouble when he decided to do away with all the false trappings of them being anywhere near his equal.

Since the founding of the Wen sect, his clan has always been a step above the rest of the cultivation world. While Wen Ruohan could admit that the sects have improved over the years, even turning out the occasional great talent, they still stunk of stagnation. Trapped in the past, unwilling to change. Wen Ruohan however, could not say the same. He grew in power, in skill, and brought his sect with him.

The others, for all their supposed superiority, were well aware of the Wen's might. Staying silent at his slights, none even entertaining him with a reaction.

He had resigned himself to hours of them skirting around the subject of his seat placements, of his motifs, of everything, when a ghostly face caught his eye.

Her eyes stared up at him from amidst a sea of muddied waste, like a gem peeking from the worthless rock around it in a mine.

Wen Ruohan waved off the bowing Wen disciples, ignoring the normal useless chatter of the sect leaders discussing the pomp of the ceremony before them. The boy was dressed in black robes, with only a few hints of purple mixed into the gray and red colors for all that he's supposedly part of the Jiang sect, judging from his placement next to that Jiang Fengmian's get, most likely their head disciple.

While he normally brushed off much of the useless gossip that his spymasters reported from the other sects, even he had been mildly amused by the story of Jiang Fengmian elevating a most likely illegitimate son to the position of head disciple over his true born heir, and his vicious wife's reaction to it. He hadn't been sure whether to applaud the man for recognizing talent outside of their precious legitimate, well-bred heirs in a way few other Sect Leaders did, or to scoff at the man for being so weak willed that he let his wife trample over him.

What was the child's name again?

Wen Ruohan's intrigue piqued further as that face loudly touted, surprisingly enough, Wen Qionglin's skill with the bow. He had never paid much attention to Wen Qing's younger brother, save to make sure that he was where he was supposed to be so Wen Ruohan's people could keep an appropriate watch over him and the doctor didn't cause unnecessary fuss in her worry.

Wen Qionglin's sad performance matched what Wen Ruohan expected from the boy's teachers' reports. Wen Qing's little brother was important only due to his blood and how his

happiness mattered to his more brilliant sister.

What did strike him as interesting however, was the way Wen Qionglin still followed the boy with his gaze, like a flower following the sun. He wondered what had happened to inspire such loyalty in his young cousin.

Wen Ruohan tapped his finger against his arm as time passed, keeping count of each flare that burst for Yunmeng Jiang, wondering which were the result of the boy that had caught his attention so vividly.

He remained silent as he watched, a looming sense of satisfaction settled through him in spite of the pitiful amount of Wen flares. The feeling made it easier than usual to ignore the gloating looks Nie Mingjue unabashedly aimed at him, and the expressions others carefully hid behind their cups. He noted with idle amusement that despite the freely offered wine, all of them stuck to tea, excepting of course, Jin Guangshan. They were like mice scenting a cat, on edge and unwilling to dull their senses.

He could not help but keep an eye on Jiang Fengmian however, as he now knew the man had in his hands something Wen Ruohan did not know he had been missing. After all, Wen Ruohan had never met Cangse Sanren, which was a true shame as she must have been incredibly like her breathtaking mother. Given the boy's eyes were identical, he couldn't imagine the mother's being any different. And even he had heard of her brightness, her wild spirit, and her willingness to argue against convention if she thought it in the right. All traits the boy shared as well.

It was no surprise to Wen Ruohan that the competition ended with the boy in the top five presented to the Sect Leaders. His displeasure at not having any of his own sect placing among them banked to embers upon seeing him up close and at seeing the boy's success light up his eyes. He truly had the same contagiously lively air as his grandmother.

Wei Wuxian, was the name as the presented child bowed.

Yes, of course. Wei from the child's supposed servant father. Wuxian, the courtesy name that meant "without envy", obviously given to remind him of his apparent place.

As Jiang Fengmian congratulated him, Wei Wuxian laughed joyously, infecting those around him with just a bit more cheer.

Wei Wuxian.

How perfect.

XxXxX

Later that evening, just as he had reached his rightful place at the head of the banquet hall he stopped, as if contemplating something. Courtesy dictated that none of the others could sit before he did. He privately placed a bet with himself on which Sect leader would bristle first, and Nie Mingjue did not disappoint, his frown quickly reaching the levels that preceded an explosion of the infamous Nie temper. Nie Mingjue's father had shared that same temper.

Wen Ruohan took his seat, breaking the tantrum like a thunderstorm on a mountain. He didn't even look to his side as he waved his second son away. "Go sit with the rest of the disciples."

His words carried enough that they caught the attention of the room, the idle chatter and shuffling of a crowd finding their seats and settling down ceased.

"W-what? But Father – my place-"

"Given your showing today, why should you sit in a place of honor at a banquet celebrating success?" Chao-er recoiled, face turning red as he puffed up in indignation but ultimately deflated in silence in face of Wen Ruohan's look before walking away, aping like it was his intention from the beginning despite the fact that everyone overheard it all..

Chao-er's lack of merit and accomplishment in his wasteful life has annoyed him in the past, but the clear excellence that Wei Wuxian showed has put them in even more stark relief. How fortunate for Wen Ruohan that the place at his side could now be filled by someone more worthy than that wastrel.

Wen Ruohan motioned to the servant standing ready at his back. "Have Wei Wuxian come forward."

The servant bowed unhesitatingly, and watched them do that quick, graceful scurry of well-trained servants down the hall.

To their credit, the Jiang sect reacted quickly to the servant's approach, quickly identifying that the man was aiming for them and shoring up their ranks in response.

The servant bowed to Jiang Fengmian before he passed along Wen Ruohan's summons. Jiang Fengmian's face shuttered in the way of a man trying desperately not to let his fear show, his son's face twisted as he failed to contain his anxiety, his hand moving to grip Wei Wuxian's robes as if that could stop such a talented cultivator from leaving him.

Wei Wuxian, ha...

Wei Wuxian looked straight up to meet his eyes without hesitation. Carefully extracting himself from the Jiang heir's hold, he approached fearlessly, his steps steady, with a geniality on his face that most people fail to muster in Wen Ruohan's direct presence. He stopped before Wen Ruohan, still perfectly calm and gave a flawless salute, contrary to rumors of his ill-mannered nature.

Wen Ruohan felt the stirrings of delight, something he had not felt in years.

Yes.

This was the perfect attitude, the perfect strength of character.

"Take your place," he ordered, indicating what was previously Chao-er's seat. Wei Wuxian's perfect face flickered just a second, momentary indecision giving way to calculation, clear as anything to Wen Ruohan's watchful eyes as the statement echoed throughout the room, silencing all in its wake.

The more scheming of the rabble around them darted glances to Chao-er, who couldn't hide his dismay.

"Sect Leader Wen," Wei Wuxian said, cautiously bowing again. "I am not worthy of th-"

"You are."

Wei Wuxian's mouth shut with a snap. Wen Ruohan endured his questioning look at Jiang Fengmian only because the man's resigned approval meant Wei Wuxian settled beside him.

He would learn who to look to in time.

With everything now as Wen Ruohan desired, his well-trained servants took the silent cue to flood the room with trays of food and drink. He had spared no expense for the feast, desiring to show the world the wonders of his sect and their place in relation to it. He was grateful he had done so as the boy's eyes widened just a fraction at the selections of the laden table.

Hushed conversations started about the room in fits and spurts, the room unusually quiet for a celebration.

The quiet seemed to have infected Wei Wuxian, as well, who for all intents and purposes appeared to be creatively rearranging his food instead of eating.

"Are you not hungry?"

Magnetic eyes flew to his, chopsticks snagging something at random and stuffing it in his mouth. He quickly chewed and swallowed. "Just admiring the excellent cuisine."

"Then have some more," he replied, personally serving more of the dishes that he noticed the boy was eyeing into the boy's bowl.

The muttering from the rabble around them picked up, which both of them ignored, Wen Ruohan in favor of continuing to gaze at Wei Wuxian, who was trying to hide how he was looking at his food like he'd be able to tell if it were somehow poisoned. Wei Wuxian sent what he probably thought was a surreptitiously cautious look his way from behind a curled bang that fell loose as he nibbled at the spiced chicken. He bit back a smile at the sight.

Before Wen Ruohan realized it, he reached out to tuck the lock of hair behind the boy's ear, running his fingers around his eyes before he cupped the boy's cheek.

The boy stilled, watching him.

Wei Wuxian had all the parts of her that he loved most. Especially their shared eyes. Black and silver blending in his eyes made that same gleaming, shifting stormy gray as hers, with identical ink black lashes surrounding them causing them to look wide and bright, though while hers had held desire, his were filled with caution.

That fiery woman who had left him waiting for her without a word as she disappeared to Baoshan Sanren's mountain, apparently taking his unborn child with her.

Because there was no doubt about it. Several of the features that weren't his grandmother's obviously came from Wen Ruohan himself. He saw the curve of Wei Wuxian's eyebrows and the twist of his lip every day in his bronze mirror.

Wen Ruohan felt his heart soar as he spotted the way Wei Wuxian's ear dipped just a little at the tip as his own did.

Which features of his did Cangse Sanren inherit? He doubted she'd look like her brothers.

Wen Xu looked like a watered down version of him, as if someone had listened to a third-hand description of Wen Ruohan and reproduced it in his son. The slim figure he had inherited from his mother did little to craft his features into something wholly unique. His first born could follow instructions and work exactly to expectations, but had no inner creative light to drive him to excel beyond that. And Wen Chao, Wen Chao favored Wen Ruohan's own father, round faced and as blunt as his failure filled personality. He was more interested in seeming important and having women fawn over him as he lazed about than to be of actual use.

If his wife still lived, he'd have tried for a third son rather than continue to abide by the disappointment of his second. Unfortunately after the double blows of her death and that woman leaving him, he never felt the draw to another and thus resigned himself to a disappointing lineage.

Wei Wuxian however....

Wen Ruohan sat in wonder at that woman's irrepressibility returned to him combined with his own cunning in her perfect, silvery eyes. It all mixed together in a boy more bright and unique than anyone he had ever seen. Wen Ruohan felt his very spirit be moved as he had never before felt, reminding him of how his mother described holding him and his siblings in the moments after their births.

He felt not like a cat toying with a mouse as he so often did, but one warmly indulging a kitten learning how to hunt.

To think he was the sort of grandfather that gave into something as banal as indulgence.

He unconsciously tilted his head in thought, trying to decide if this sudden attachment was a weakness, only to feel a bit of warmth spread through him as he realized how much the gesture was like the one his grandson had done earlier to try and distract him, even in something so insignificant, the boy was like him.

No, this was not a weakness. What grandfather wouldn't take joy in an accomplished, wonderful grandson like Wei Wuxian and burn the world to ash if anything threatened him.

"I can't see you cowering like a mouse at all," he stated, not needing any reply. He couldn't help the flicker of a smile as he threaded his fingers through his grandson's hair. The texture matched Wen Ruohan's, but the curl must have come from Wei Changze as his grandmother's hair had been as straight as his own.

Had Wei Changze tamed his hair, or did he wear it as loosely bound as his son? Wen Ruohan regretted only having paid him the barest passing attention so long ago. The man must have been something to have caught his daughter's eye and contributed so well to his grandson.

He dropped his hand to grasp his wine but could not keep his eyes away from the boy.

Wei Wuxian breathed deeply, face perfectly poised. Others would undoubtedly be distracted by the head tilt and the bright grin, missing the sharp mind unraveling them, those gray eyes calculating as he planned his next move. How many idiots thought the boy careless? Wei Wuxian's chin tilted to a degree that bordered on challenging from the way it let the boy look down his nose at him, but only served to give Wen Ruohan another chance to admire him.

Most would have been distracted by his insolent smile, consequently most likely missing just how calculated the degree of insolence was even as their hackles would rise at it.

"Mice have the tendency to be eaten, Sect Leader." Wen Ruohan wouldn't call the approving sound he made a laugh, but it was close. How daring of his grandson to try and provoke him, and in the heart of his sect no less!

"Good. Never start doing so." Confusion edged the defiant smile endearingly.

He let himself be momentarily distracted by a vision of having his grandson by his side after the conference. He could easily force Jiang Fengmian into compliance if the man protested.

But no, that would not do.

While Wen Ruohan's word would be enough if he claimed relation to the boy, the lack of physical proof would always cast doubt. Though Wei Changze had left the Yunmeng Jiang, those ties still existed, especially with Jiang Fengmian raising Wei Wuxian after the death of his parents, of Wen Ruohan's own daughter, whom he had not known existed until this day.

For all Wen Ruohan knew there had been some type of sworn bond that caused the man to value Wei Wuxian as much as his own son for all he had not given Wei Wuxian the honor of adopting him directly. With all the years and resources he had spent to raise the boy the man would have a greater claim than the family of the daughter that married his servant.

And Wei Wuxian had been brought up to be a promising head disciple. It would do Wen Ruohan no good to force the boy from those peasants he'd been raised to be attached to.

If Wen Ruohan was anything, he was patient.

Patient enough that he could quietly, subtly, lure the youth in until the boy had recognized his true place and come to the Wen of his own volition.

Wen Ruohan made a mental note to remove Lotus Pier from the sects to make an example of using martial power. Even when Wei Wuxian took his rightful place, from what he could gather of the boy Wei Wuxian would likely still hold some sentimentality towards the place, just as Wen Qing did for those useless commoners of the Dafan Wen branch that had raised her and her brother.



It would be a fitting gift for his coming of age, Wen Ruohan thought. Wei Wuxian would have Yunmeng and Lotus Pier whole and hale.

Wei Wuxian is of an age that a certain amount of independence would do him some good, especially as he had spent so many of his formative years undoubtedly not being treated as he should be, his mind poisoned by his inferiors to think that he owed them deference.

Yes, having him lead an outpost would be good for the boy.

He'd have to select his advisors and cohort carefully though, to ensure that the boy's affection and prior history did not give way to being taken advantage again by the Jiangs.

Wen Ruohan pointedly sipped his wine. "The praiseworthy skill you showed today speaks highly of the Jiang's training."

Wei Wuxian shrugged nonchalantly, but Wen Ruohan could easily see the forced nonchalance in the gesture that could only come with practice. The boy gave a wide grin just short of flippant, and a shrug that would have infuriated one prone to short temper. "Sect leader Jiang, Madam Yu, and the other senior disciples were admirable teachers, but I spend far too much time hunting pheasants and shooting kites instead of the fields. Much more fun for someone who can't stay still like me!"

The comment, for all its supposed innocence, could easily be taken as an insult given his own sect's failure during the competition. He'd have ground anyone else into dust at even the implication. Instead, even to his own surprise, he smiled, finding himself as tolerant as an old cat with a kitten chewing its ear.

The boy dared to test him! Dared to say something like that to his face when others would have obfuscated, speak of hard work or pretend to take from his sect's example in their training to avoid offending him!

The boy was bearing his tiny kitten teeth and his good, though obvious, attempts at deflection.

Wen Ruohan was almost proud.

"The most useful part of teaching is practical application," he replied, undercutting whatever reaction Wei Wuxian was hoping to garner. "Teachers are just there to polish one's true talent, after all." And Wei Wuxian has true talent, his superior blood breeding true and utilized masterfully. "Do you enjoy hunting?" If Wei Wuxian actually enjoyed the activity he'd need to review the reports from the forester to find something similar.

"Of course!" Wei Wuxian grinned, his eyes flinting just a bit at the edges before being replaced with a deliberately wide-eyed look reminiscent of a kitten begging for more ear scratches.

In between constantly serving choice portions of food in Wei Wuxian's bowl, Wen Ruohan listened to the rambles on childish wanderings, night hunts, and likely edited shenanigans he was able to prod the boy into sharing. Each story highlighted Yunmeng's delicious food and

entertainment, which reinforced Wen Ruohan's earlier note to gift the location to his grandson.

With time, (and the wine that Wen Ruohan made sure to refill his cup with) the tension gradually left the boy's frame. While he did not get appreciably drunk as Chao-er would, his words grew less carefully polite, less cautious of letting details of his own strength slip through, though he still had enough of his wit about him to avoid saying anything that would allow Wen Ruohan to find offense in anyone but Wei Wuxian.

Despite a deluge of words designed to overwhelm and wash over anyone listening, Wen Ruohan was able to pick apart the tales for hints of hidden excellence. Despite his careful delicacy, it quickly became apparent that Wei Wuxian was always at the forefront, creating clever solutions for the most mundane issues or to save his shidis from the messes they found themselves in. He was the one to figure out whatever the threat was and guide those with him to neutralize it, even if the threat was a mere farmer that caught them picking lotus seeds.

And it was all far too consistent to be the type of false boasting that his idiot second son often employed.

No. This, this combined with his skill earlier, was real. A clear sign of a powerful, knowledgeable leader in the making.

After about two jars, Wei Wuxian became animated enough to start talking with his hands and he became unguarded enough with Wen Ruohan's constant approving nods and encouraging questions to explain about some spells and talismans he'd created to aid in his various escapades.

Wen Ruohan had never cared to experiment much with talismans or spellwork outside of his own interests, he found that mastering currently known variations to be enough. Still, he knew enough of the theory of modifying them to know how finicky it could be. Of the few people he knew that attempted to modify known talismans or create new ones, none could do so as casually, as successfully, as Wei Wuxian.

How was this not known? How was a mind like his grandson's not widely celebrated and lauded?

The fact that no one recognized his genius was just more proof that they needed to be brought in line.

By the time the dishes were no longer served, with only wine, teas, and sweet snacks freely flowing and being replenished, Wen Ruohan had finally earned an actual smile from Wei Wuxian instead of his earlier mask-like one, crowned by a peal of that bright laughter for a comment comparing certain sect leaders to a flock of chickens that attacked some of his shidis during a night hunt.

Soon, the Jiang Sect rose, moving to leave the party, with Jiang Fengmian and his touchy spawn moving to bow to him as host, causing Wei Wuxian to start. Wen Ruohan couldn't help but smirk a bit at the fact that he had been such a focus of his grandson's attention.

The boy raised an eyebrow at him, giving that calculative head tilt and that deliberately provoking smile again. “Have I entertained you enough with my foolishness this evening, Sect Leader Wen?”

Wen Ruohan couldn’t help but laugh at the audacity of his marvelous grandson. He waved the boy off. The youth rose to his feet and darted to join the Jiangs after cutting a perfectly executed bow.

He watched as Wei Wuxian was subsumed in a wall of purple and felt a pang of something deep in his chest.

“Wei Wuxian,” he called as Jiang Wanyin reached out to pull the head disciple near in a gesture that seemed almost as possessive as it was protective, interrupting the sect heir from whatever uselessn drivel he intended to whisper in his grandson’s ear.

The boy froze for a moment before turning and bowing to him.

“I expect you back in the Nightless City a month from now.” Though he had noted the boy relaxing throughout the night, the sudden tenseness of his shoulders certainly emphasized it again.

Wen Ruohan did not frown so as not to worry Wei Wuxian, but it took a certain amount of control he did not appreciate needing to use. He took a sip of wine to ease the sting.

“For what purpose do you require my head disciple for, Sect Leader Wen?” Jiang Fengmian stepped forward blocking his view. “Perhaps I might be able to provide a suitable alternative.”

Wen Ruohan smiled into his cup, his voice loud enough to echo through the banquet hall all the same. “I enjoyed our conversation.” He carefully set his cup down, meeting the man’s eyes. He’d never particularly liked Jiang Fenmian, nor hated him. Today that had changed. The man had spent so much time with his daughter, with his grandson, with those Wen Ruohan had been denied of all this time.

He could not quite stop some of his ire from leaking into his voice as he stared down at this man who had had so much of what should have been his. “I enjoyed it enough that if he does not come, I shall simply have to seek him out myself.”

Jiang Fengmian paled, which Wen Ruohan ignored as he offered a sincere smile to the boy behind him before rising and leaving the hall himself, seeing no reason to stay any longer.

XxXxX

Impatience was a less than ideal experience. And not one that Wen Ruohan was accustomed to.

Clasping his wrist behind his back so hard that his bones creaked, Wen Ruohan focused on his grandson approaching from the air.

Even before he stopped perceiving time the way commoners did so long ago, he could call himself a patient man. He'd been able to face each new experience, every test, each challenge with a measured response and the steady, precise actions of a cat hunting a mouse. He has cultivated near enough to immortality that time has lost any significant sway over him. Cultivation, the strength of his sect and it's wellbeing, everything would be his with a little planning and time. He had yet to face a challenge he could not conquer, save once and even that failure had resulted in the marvelous boy approaching where he stood at the entrance to the palace proper.

He felt more on edge than he could ever quite recall as he waited for that figure to alight in front of him, save for the tense weeks he had waited for her to return to him after a night hunt, before he received her missive that she had left the mortal realms of cultivation for Baoshan Sanren's mountain.

For the first time since he'd waited , there was something coming to him that was not there right when he wanted it to be.

This whole month has felt similar to that.

Finally, an attendant announced the arrival of the Jiang head disciple. Wen Ruohan took a moment to give his grandson a onceover to make sure that the intervening month had been good to him.

Wei Wuxian's posture appeared neatly efficient, loose and comfortable in the air, his hair a wavy whip behind him. Rather than the black with purple edgings, he was in traditional purple Yunmeng Jiang disciple robes. The dye still bright and new, clashing with the more worn and obviously well-loved wrist guards and accessories he wore.

Wen Ruohan released his hold on himself with a smile and stepped forward as Wei Wuxian expertly slipped to the ground before him. The boy immediately gave a bow, a bright grin splitting his cheeks.

"Welcome, Wei Wuxian," Wen Ruohan stated before the boy could say any type of false platitude drilled into him by Jiang Fengmian.

A light flush with a hint of sweat, and a thin coat of dust on the hem of flight-mussed purple robes gave him the perfect opportunity to draw him into where he belonged. "Come, refresh yourself before lunch."

Wei Wuxian looked a bit unsure for a moment, but recovered with the speed of someone used to having to hide his reactions. "Thank you, Sect Leader Wen."

Wen Ruohan shifted, clearly indicating where he wanted his grandson to fall in step with him. Wei Wuxian paused, taking the gesture in before obeying.

Wen Ruohan did not make a practice of personally greeting his guests on their arrival, instead preferring to unsettle them by making them wait even if he had ordered they come to him, so it made sense that Jiang Fengmian had prepared Wei Wuxian for something entirely different than a one on one tour, guided by the Chief Cultivator himself.

He found it amusing to make people squirm after all, and haughty men used to getting their own way blustered so entertainingly when ignored. While Wen Ruohan still thought them foolish for their displays of temper, currently he found himself slightly, just slightly mind you, sympathetic to their plight, for it was only right that everyone should be as impatient to see him as he was to see Wei Wuxian.

In his periphery his servants scurried ahead of them, undoubtedly passing word of his grandson's arrival and triple checking that arrangements met the standards Wen Ruohan ordered for this visit.

Setting a leisurely pace, he took a winding route so that he could explain more about the city to his boy. The palace of the Nightless City had originally been a fortress, expanded upon and enriched by countless generations of Wens even before Wen Mao turned the cultivation world on its head. There was a certain power in the knowledge of the more meandering routes though the expansive building, of the understanding of how each of the additions fit together and had been repurposed over the years to reflect the growing grandeur of the Sect.

As they meandered towards the family quarters, located in the oldest, most secure parts of the palace, he pointed out some of the more visually stunning clan landmarks. Wei Wuxian glanced at most of them with only mild appreciation, politely commentating on them in response. He only made impressed noises or asked questions on the best pieces with a discerning eye that Wen Ruohan appreciated. In fact, most pieces he liked were Wen Ruohan's own favorites.

He had prepared a few more... superfluous gifts to see Wei Wuxian's reaction, but given the way he didn't even glance at neither gold nor gilt, and seemed only interested in either unique, well-made weaponry or cultivation artifacts, he felt encouraged that the boy was not the type to be swayed by the foolish trappings of wealth, women, and the opinions of others as Chao-er is.

While he disagreed with what was likely the reason the Jiangs had chosen Wuxian as his grandson's courtesy name, it did seem to fit his nature. He'd need to test further to know how deep that selfless behavior went.

He had the feeling that as he brought the boy to where he belonged, Wei Wuxian would get everything he deserved, though it may not be necessarily what he expected or wanted.

When they finally reached the family quarters, Wen Ruohan led Wei Wuxian to a door with beautifully painted panels depicting a firebird in full flight over the Qishan Wen volcano, crowned by a rising sun, only a few doors down from his own rooms.

"Thank you for your generosity, Sect Leader Wen!" Wei Wuxian bowed, practically throwing the door open and darting in before the servant stationed by them could even reach the handle to let him in.

Wen Ruohan entered sedately after him, enjoying the small gasp of surprised pleasure as the boy took in the living area.

Wen Ruohan had the space renovated for Wei Wuxian's arrival. There was much work to be done as they had sat unused for many years. His brother would have hated the new look, being far more a fan of gold and gilt than even Chao-er. Killing him had caused Wen Ruohan no sorrow. His generation had fought viciously for the position of sect leader, and that act had been the last to clear the way for his ascension.

The key element of the room was still the Wen sun motif, but with ivy vines and lilies artfully adorning the walls, which were about as the closest he could stand to lotuses. The upholstery had been changed to shades of blue and green though, instead of the reds that previously dominated the room. He'd had them expand the bathing room to include a much larger tub given the many stories of swimming Wei Wuxian had told. He'd also increased the shelving in the study and had them fully stocked with books, theory scrolls, talisman paper, high grade cinnabar, a whole range of inks, and everything else he could think of.

"Is it to your liking?"

Wei Wuxian startled from where he had wandered to poke at a vanity, which if Wei Wuxian opened the drawers and the boxes, he'd find to be stocked full with numerous hair ornaments, jewelry, and other baubles that Wen Ruohan had been able to source at such short notice. He had more under commission, including several that were altered from gifts meant for his grandmother. The boy seemed sentimental enough to appreciate such things. "Yes!" He hurriedly reassured, turning to bow with a bright grin. "I've never seen such wonderful guest rooms! Even the ones in Carp Tower that we used when visiting the peacock weren't as grand!"

"These rooms are not for guests, but you." Wen Ruohan gestured at the suite. "Everything you see, has no owner but you."

Wei Wuxian's curly hair bounced as his head tilted, his grin fading and eyes widening. Suddenly in that moment he looked so heartbreakingly like his grandmother like when Wen Ruohan had professed his love it caused his breath to catch. It seemed only fitting that the only person to cause his rare affection since her would be her own grandson. "I- I must have misunderstood?" Wei Wuxian asked nervously. "These can't be my permanent rooms?"

"You understood perfectly." Wei Wuxian looked at him like a kitten faced with a choice between a treat and toy for the first time.

No. The boy could not doubt his place.

Wen Ruohan moved, too fluidly to spook the boy, revealing the tastefully done bathroom with the large currently steaming tub at the center, ready for Wei Wuxian. "I'll leave you to your preparations, the servants will show you to lunch after."

He pressed a hand on Wei Wuxian's shoulder as he passed the boy, as if to anchor him to the Wen rooms.

Wen Ruohan found Xu-er waiting in the hall as he left. He quickly fell into step at his side as Wen Ruohan headed for the stairs.

“He’s staying in the family quarters?” Wen Ruohan merely nodded.

A pause, his son actually thinking on his own for once. “Are you adopting him?”

Wen Ruohan scoffed. “There is no need. He’s already mine.”

Ignoring the nearly audible confusion and tight look Wen Xu shot back towards Wei Wuxian's rooms, Wen Ruohan picked up his pace. Though physically he looked to be in his early twenties, he had grown strong enough in cultivation that that was deceptive. By the time Wen Ruohan had been Xu-er’s age, he had taken over his sect, just like the boy’s age-mates did when the time came for them, though they did not fare nearly as well as his first born in terms of defying aging.

Xu-er hadn't once tried to assassinate Wen Ruohan to take his place though, nor had he married or taken a concubine, and he showed little interest in fathering sons.

He had no desire to succeed beyond what Wen Ruohan told him to do.

No creativity.

He always made himself useful though, and more importantly remained staunchly loyal.

Now that Wen Ruohan had staked his claim on Wei Wuxian, Xu-er would defend Wei Wuxian to the death.

On the other hand, as always, Chao-er would be a problem.

His youngest was extremely petty, though to his nearly infinitesimal credit was just clever enough to realize he’d be passed over in a second for his ineptitude. Chao-er might foolishly try to lash out and hurt Wei Wuxian in another halfwitted attempt to make himself appear as accomplished and merciless as his older brother.

Wen Ruohan had contemplated several times over the years halting his support of the boy, to just cut him loose and let him destroy himself. Unfortunately, him dying without providing heirs would not be ideal given Xu-er’s own lack of marriage. It was just wasteful enough that he abided by the embarrassment. Chao-er couldn’t even follow the simplest of Ruohan's instructions, needing babysitters (currently in the form of Wen Zhuliu which was a distinct underutilization of talent) to keep things even marginally on track.

Perhaps if Chao-er finally produced a child then Wen Ruohan would not regret his death?

He left Xu-er to head for the forges, based on what he had discerned of his grandson’s taste today he would need to have the forge master make a few alterations to Wei Wuxian's gifts.

Then after that, he could do some work himself to whittle away the last hour before lunch.

At least that was what he planned before the head servant, Qian Heng, accompanied by a young male servant quickly crossed his office to bow before his desk. “Wen-zongzhu.”

He raised an eyebrow.

Qian Heng, in an unusual show of reticence, bowed a second time with a nervous look on his face.

“Be quick with it,” he ordered.

The man swallowed. “Sect Leader Wen, Young Master Wei stated that he did not need this servant’s assistance bathing, and was most insistent on being left alone to complete his preparations. To not offend the young master, this servant complied. However, while making the clothing substitution that you ordered, well...” The man trailed off and nodded the other servant forward.

The young man looked faint, but managed to hold it together, despite speaking more to the floor with an unnecessarily deep bow to avoid meeting his eyes. “Sect Leader Wen, this servant admits to their error, and begs for your mercy. When exchanging the young master’s travel robes for his dinner robes, this servant saw that the young master...” The man looked pale as a corpse, swallowing around the words he was trying to get out like a choking victim gasping for air.

Wen Ruohan glared at him, causing the man to shudder and collapse to his knees. “Speak whatever you mean to say quickly.”

“The young master is covered in lash scars across his back and legs, and while this servant did not have a proper look, there were several other mottled scars on his legs and arms, though those scars were old.”

Wen Ruohan carefully set his brush down. He stood, turned and faced the window. He carefully placed his hands behind his back, and clasped his wrist. His cultivation had already healed the bruising from earlier, but his grip tightened enough to replace it. He gazed at the view which overlooked the back gardens and rest of the Nightless City, nestled in the base of the volcano towering over them all.

Patience.

Patience.

“No one else saw?” He questioned.

“No, Sect Leader. And this servant only told Qian Heng, Sect Leader, as this servant is otherwise unworthy to approach the Sect Leader.”

While it wasn’t ideal that he had glanced at Wei Wuxian when the other had demanded privacy, he’d been following Wen Ruohan’s orders when he did. And it was ultimately a good thing that his first instinct was to tell him. The servant could be useful in helping him keep an eye on Wei Wuxian as he adjusted to his new position.

“You will be assigned to Wei Wuxian permanently going forward. You’re to be the only one allowed near his chambers when he’s bathing. I don’t think I have to say what will happen if someone else sees.”



He ignored their profuse gratitude for his mercy as he waved a hand to dismiss them.

Wen Ruohan had re-read all the reports on Yunmeng Jiang for the past several years, skimming for any sign of his grandson, even as he set his spies to learn more. It was the most active his network had been in years, and given that it had been a month and they'd barely been able to return little more than hearsay and rumors, he would need to clean house with them if they had missed *this*.

All he'd learned was that Madam Yu was prone to scream at Wei Wuxian and frequently found fault in nearly everything he did, even more so than she did the rest of the Yunmeng Jiang disciples. She also compared her own son to Wei Wuxian frequently, with neither of them coming off favorably.

There were also rumors speculating the reason behind the Jiang daughter's broken engagement to the Jin heir, and that Wei Wuxian played a major part of that, but no one seemed to agree on the details aside from the fact that he had attacked the Jin boy. Even that confirmation had come from Wen Qing's report as she had been "studying" at Cloud Recesses with her brother to monitor their reactions to his increased aggressive tactics when it had happened.

Had that been why?

Whatever the reason, he questioned his earlier thought to remove Lotus Pier from the list of Sects to force to their knees, but then he thought back to how Wei Wuxian seemed to dote on the younger Jiang disciples at the Discussion Conference, and how he cared enough for the Jiang daughter to cause the kind of disturbance that resulted in a broken engagement.

Should he be planning to arrange his grandson's marriage to her?

Or did he think of her as a sister?

He silently cursed his spies again for his lack of information.

Again, he felt that impatience from earlier.

This time to know more.

He felt robbed.

Grandchildren were often away from their grandparents, but he should have had time with Wei Wuxian whenever he wanted.

With his daughter, who by all accounts was just as incredible as her mother.

Wen Ruohan moved away from the window, walking at a deliberate pace to the family dining room. A servant immediately poured him a cup of wine after he seated himself as another line of servants brought in steaming dishes even though it was a half hour earlier than usual. The impeccable training of his servants showed through as he spotted several dishes more traditionally found in the Yunmeng region, and as he sipped his wine, he recognized one of his better vintages.

Wen Xu quickly followed him in, sitting at his spot at Wen Ruohan's right, more well trained and attuned to his Father's whims than any other. He tapped his finger, waiting for his guest of honor to appear. Surely enough, Wei Wuxian rushed in shortly after, and Wen Ruohan bit back a smile at the servant's hands that were not quite fast enough to pull away from straightening the boy's robes before the door revealed him completely.

Wei Wuxian looked breathtaking, as he was finally dressed befitting his station.

The tailor had excellently managed the cut, despite only working off of Wen Ruohan's estimates. The robes emphasized the boy's lean muscular build, flowing around him perfectly. Even the boots appeared a perfect fit.

In place of the slightly ill-fitting Yunmeng Jiang purple robes, Wei Wuxian was draped in black with silver embroidery, with gray under-robes peeking through. While the official black and red Wen sect robes felt like too big of a push this early, the black could be passed off for Wei Wuxian's own preferences for the color. Wen Ruohan smiled at the glitter of embroidered beetle wings circling his collar, providing an extra depth to the silver.

As Wei Wuxian straightened his posture from its gangly looseness from his run, beetle wings combined with his silver headpiece made his gray eyes look even more mercurial than usual as they darted hesitantly between himself and Xu-er. He quickly bowed. "This disciple apologies for keeping you waiting."

"No need to be so formal." Wen Ruohan waved to the empty seat beside him opposite Xu-er in invitation. The seat had remained empty since Wen Ruohan's wife died, more from practicality than sentiment as he found putting Xu-er between Chao-er and himself reduced the stupid ramblings of his second son as his older brother didn't hesitate in repeatedly beating him into the ground under the guise of training whenever he annoyed him.

With barely visible hesitation, Wei Wuxian took the offered seat, another overly bright grin on his face. The servants quickly adjusted the seating placement and poured wine for the young master that smiled brightly at them in thanks.

Wen Ruohan smirked into a sip of his own wine as he saw the way his people already seemed so enamored by the boy in his short time here. He looked forward to seeing how much more Wei Wuxian would endear himself to them without even realizing it.

Wen Ruohan kicked a light discussion off by asking the boy about his flight, wanting to further set the boy at ease.

For all that Wei Wuxian spoke in response to Wen Ruohan's prompts, almost rambling really, the conversation started off tense, his grandson still suspicious and deflective, especially in relation to questions about the Jiangs, though admiration for his shijie still managed to shine through.

It was pleasantly surprising when Xu-er finally piqued Wei Wuxian's interest as he described the three months he had studied in Gusu before Wen Ruohan had recalled him to Qishan.

His heir had better things to do than learn the precepts of another sect, especially when they placed so much emphasis on the incorrect fact that theirs were better than any others.

"I was only there for a few months too, but I got kicked out." Wei Wuxian grinned, his hands gesturing lively with the force of keeping his shifting thoughts under control. "Looking back, I'm pretty sure Lan Qiren was looking for an excuse though, the old man really didn't like me or my mother," Wen Ruohan carefully took a sip of his wine, "it's actually surprising I made it past the first class!"

Wen Ruohan felt intrigued. "What happened during the first class?"

"Ah," a mischievous look flitted across Wei Wuxian's features. "I suggested using resentful energy to deal with an angry ghost." Wei Wuxian sniggered a bit. "Lan-xiansheng was kind enough to send me on my way for the day! Though really, I think he just had faith in my ability to dodge."

"Dodge?" Xu-er asked.

Wei Wuxian nodded, grinning widely. "He threw a book at my head!" Wen Ruohan almost choked on the bite of spiced chicken he'd eaten, imagining the stuffed up old curmudgeon actually losing his temper enough to do that.

After taking a sip of wine to clear his throat, Wen Ruohan smiled, delighted at everything about his grandson. "Have you used it?" He hadn't even thought to harness resentful energy before as his experiments had been more focused on ways to hone his own Qi.

"Used it?"

"Resentful energy."

"It's unorthodox," Wei Wuxian frowned, an uneasy look crossing his face. "There are easier paths to cultivate when using resentful energy is so difficult."

"That sounds like you've used it," Wen Ruohan offered a soothing smile as Wei Wuxian immediately blanched. "Experience and experimentation are the keys to greatness, so I can hardly scold you for it if your mind led you on your path.. False modesty does not suit you."

Wei Wuxian looked torn between looking like he'd been gut punched and like he'd heard the most unbelievable thing.

Wen Ruohan wanted to repay that look with the Jiangs' hides.

"Tell me about your experiments," he prodded,

Wei Wuxian recovered quickly, his face nearly blanking into a mostly neutral mask, but he hesitated a moment before replying, savoring his tea to buy time. Wen Ruohan patiently waited as he watched Wei Wuxian quickly calculating the risks through his eyes.

"It was more an accident rather than an experiment." Wei Wuxian finally stated. "Some fierce corpses accidentally got released near me when I was unarmed. My throat almost got ripped

out when I went to help, and when I reached out spiritually on instinct, instead I got resentful energy back.”

Wen Ruohan nodded encouragingly, trying to hide the feeling of pride welling up in him. The fact that energy manipulation of any form came instinctively to him spoke great things of his understanding of cultivation.

“It fought my control pretty painfully. I held the fierce corpse long enough for Jiang Cheng to save me, but it left some after effects.” He opened and closed his hand almost unconsciously. “My arm was numb for days!” He finished with a sharp smile. “Not fun.”

“From that, it sounds like an improved technique might solve your problem, rather than giving up entirely.” Wen Ruohan mused. “Have you ever practiced with qi manipulation or guiding spiritual energy? Not through talismans or spell work, but directly?” To demonstrate he waved a hand, destroying the wine cup at Chao-er’s empty seat.

Wei Wuxian started, staring at the shards. “It’s not a core tenet of the Yunmeng Jiang teachings.”

Wen Ruohan felt a bubble of eager anticipation, not just because he wanted to see how the brilliant mind of his grandson would adapt to the challenge, but to pass on what the boy should have learned long ago and to see what heights he would reach with them. “I can teach you some techniques.”

As soon as Wei Wuxian had eaten enough to satisfy Wen Ruohan, he led him to the family training grounds.

It didn’t take long for a ball of red spiritual energy the exact color of Wen Ruohan’s own to manifest before Wei Wuxian. He wanted to throw his head back and laugh in joy, but refrained so as to avoid distracting the boy. The ball stabilized and held for a moment, but shattered when Wei Wuxian opened his own eyes and startled at the sight.

“Wonderful first attempt!” Wei Wuxian perked up at the comment before immediately trying to look serious again. If even a quarter of the rumors surrounding Lotus Pier were accurate, his grandson had probably been given far less praise than he deserved from those afraid of upsetting Madam Yu.

A pity.

If he was this powerful now, how great would he be if he had been properly nurtured? Not that he wouldn’t take every advantage the Jiangs had left him to win over his grandson, but it caused something deep in his heart to rage at seeing the bright boy so hampered by everyone around him.

Wen Ruohan couldn’t wait to see the heights the boy would rise to after he saved the boy from those worms.

Over the course of the rest of the day Wei Wuxian quickly memorized the core principles and, once he had relaxed and got more focused on learning instead of caution, started

asking thoughtful, insightful questions.

How foolish, he thought, of the Jiangs, the Lans, of all of them, to not prize such an eager, brilliant pupil. It truly showed why their proper place is beneath his feet.

Far quicker than he had imagined, less than an hour after dinner in the training area as they discussed the history of several of the Wen sect principles and how they related to qi manipulation, Wei Wuxian had, of his own accord, made several of the mental connections needed to begin mastering Wen Ruohan's signature skills. Wen Ruohan had only been able to laugh in delight and congratulate the boy who looked torn between shock and wonder at the praise, adorably bashful.

"It is truly nothing when this one has such a wonde-" Wei Wuxian started, and Wen Ruohan cut him off with a wave, the smile on his face not diminishing one bit.

"I'll hear nothing of that fake modesty from you, it is astounding how quickly you're picking this up. You are truly a bright star of your generation. You're already on par with my sons when they had studied this for years. You deserve the praise."

He wasn't even exaggerating. Wen Xu had talent, but his power had plateaued. He'd reached the peak of everything Wen Ruohan taught him and seemed content with his place, not striving further the way he would need to in order to truly be his match. Chao-er, well, the less said about that mess the better, especially with that boy failing at following his instructions as often as he did.

Where his sons were unable to grow, Wei Wuxian seemed to thrive.

Wen Ruohan spent Wei Wuxian's time in the Nightless City drowning him in equal parts lessons and indulgences. The boy, though he tried to keep his defenses up, couldn't seem to help staring at him almost helplessly for both when he thought he wasn't looking.

It made him want to spoil the boy more.

Wei Wuxian's bright personality, wide eyed stares, quick wit, open affection, and genuineness even affected Xu-er. His eldest, who for all that he normally failed to pay attention to the likes or dislikes of anyone that wasn't himself or his Father, had apparently went down to the city proper to personally buy chili oil for the boy after they'd had a discussion on how bland the food was at Gusu, and Wei Wuxian's tales of his many adventures to smuggle in his favorites. Xu-er had looked more than a little adoring as his nephew had laughed in joy at receiving the jar, cradling it close to his chest like it was a precious artifact.

After that he'd started eating with him for all his meals, not just the once-a-day family meals that Wen Ruohan arranged. He'd even taken to having a desk set up in the courtyard so he could do his work for the sect next to where Wei Wuxian studied the many scrolls and techniques Wen Ruohan made available to him.

There'd been an initial... not quite scuffle, more of a test of wills at that, Wei Wuxian obviously thinking he was being surveilled (and he was, just not so blatantly. Naturally, Wen Ruohan made sure that there were guards and servants constantly watching his grandson. He

wasn't going to lose him now that he'd found him.). Xu-er had almost taken offense at Wei Wuxian's almost incredulous surprise at his presence, nearly ruining their budding relationship, until Xu-er's halting explanation that he just wanted to be nearby in case Wei Wuxian had questions that he could answer. Wei Wuxian lit up at that, laughing almost giddily. Wen Ruohan had the feeling that if Wei Wuxian had been even a little bit more comfortable, he would have actually hugged Xu-er, who seemed to have drawn the same conclusion and looked at his nephew like he was some type of adorable fluffy puppy.

It felt empowering to see his grandson excel in all of the lessons, and utterly heartwarming to watch as he slotted himself well into the family dynamic, thriving at the attention lavished on him.

Wei Wuxian, when happy, truly glowed like a bright ray of sunshine breaking through a stormy day's cloud cover, illuminating all the good things in a way that you had the tendency to forget in the cultivator's longevity.

When it was finally time for the boy to return to Yunmeng, Wen Ruohan had to hide his smile at the boy's flash of reluctance, emboldened enough in Wei Wuxian's growing acceptance of his place in the family that he demanded he return again in two weeks. His grandson's look back took some of the sting from that damned feeling of impatience that already started to eat at him the moment Wei Wuxian took off.

XxXxXVvVvVXxXxXVvVvV

XxXxX

Wei Wuxian stopped by Yiling on his way back to Yunmeng. He didn't really need the break, but if he didn't change it'd only cause problems if he arrived at Lotus Pier dressed in the finery Wen Ruohan gifted him, not when Madam Yu had finally allowed him to fully wear the sect's colors.

Still, Wei Wuxian couldn't help run his hands over the silver studded bracers that he kept on. They were very well made, and were expertly fitted. It was actually a little scary how much they fit him, just like the whole wardrobe of robes.

How had Wei Wuxian been sized up so well?

They didn't quite match his taste, more than a few were too extravagant, or had too many layers, but they all fit him better than anything he'd worn that hadn't been made by shijie. Even when Uncle Jiang had appointed him head disciple, the robes he'd been given weren't anything like what the previous one, Lou Han, had worn. Those had been gorgeously dyed and embroidered pieces just shy of Jiang Cheng's. Wei Wuxian's had been nice, but still obviously in the blacks and grays so unlike the Jiang purple and the opposite of the otherwise colorful Yunmeng styles. And the quality was still that of servants' robes, even with where he could see Shijie's needlework in trying to make them nice and the soft inner robes she would have had to sneak in.

Madam Yu had obviously felt the need to remind him of his place when Uncle Jiang had appointed him to a position that should have been Jiang Cheng's.

And the robes Wen Ruohan had given him didn't even hold a candle to the accessories...

He knew from buying gifts for shijie and helping Jiang Cheng pick out things for his parents and other guest gifts exactly how expensive even one of those intricately designed, delicate looking jeweled headpieces had to be, but the Wen Sect Leader had given him twenty of them.

And then there were all the bracers, shoes and boots, belts... all sorts of things.

And on top of all that, they paled in comparison to how well stocked the study in his rooms was. And his rooms. Wen Ruohan had given him a suite almost as big as Jiang Fengmian's pavilion, it was insane! It was also situated smack dab in the family rooms! Even after Uncle Jiang had taken him in, he'd only shared with Jiang Cheng for a few weeks until Uncle Jiang and Madam Yu had compromised on housing him in a room at the very edge of the family pavilions, normally used for housing particularly favored servants or senior disciples.

Everything about the situation felt a little terrifying.

Wen Ruohan seemed determined to drown Wei Wuxian in luxury.

And not just material riches, but training too. He'd spent hours with Wei Wuxian, drilling him on qi usage and theories on energy manipulation.

He'd even started him on more breathing and meditation exercises. He hadn't even yelled when Wei Wuxian had trouble sitting still for them, instead showing him methods that would still let him move as he goes through the steps. When he'd finally been able to clear his mind and sink into a meditative state as he followed Wen Ruohan's softly murmured breathing cues, well, it was probably the most successful Wei Wuxian had ever been at meditation. He couldn't really think of many other times he'd been nearly as relaxed.

It was distinctly unsettling.

He couldn't figure out what Wen Ruohan wanted in exchange for the gifts and the kindness.

Was it all some type of bribe?

Did he want him to betray Yunmeng Jiang?

That's what he'd thought, except Wen Ruohan hadn't asked him about anything that could even remotely be used against the Jiangs. He seemed to care more about Wei Wuxian's interests, and even his questions on Wei Wuxian's prior training didn't even focus on the specifics of their methods, so much as learning what worked for Wei Wuxian so he could adjust his own lessons.

Uncle Jiang had warned Wei Wuxian that Wen Ruohan would most likely want something... distasteful, from him, but Wei Wuxian hadn't gotten that vibe from the banquet when he got singled out, and he hadn't gotten that impression at any time during his visit either.

And he knew when people were eyeing him like that.

There'd been a few absolutely disgusting monsters when he'd been on the streets, like the brothels' head hunters that had looked at him like he was meat, and when he'd gotten older, there had been plenty of drunk older Jiang disciples, or masters, young masters, envoys from other sects that would look at him and question if Jiang Fengman was fucking him if he wasn't his son like the rumors said, and if they could have a turn, or up his nonexistent offer.

So he really did know how creeps like that behave.

Wen Ruohan didn't give off the type of feeling they did. Sect leader Jin, Jin Guangshan had more in common with those people than the Wen sect leader did even when he'd been physically handling Wei Wuxian to correct a stance or working him through new breathing or qi flow patterns.

It felt almost like...

Well, no matter.

He needed to hurry if he was going to make it back to Lotus Pier on time.

XxXxX

Jiang Yanli would not quite admit to being anxious as she and Jiang Cheng waited near the gates to Lotus Pier. Wei Wuxian was scheduled to return today, and so they had both found as many tasks as they could feasibly get away with to hover near the entrance. Luckily it was the end of the month when the rents and tributes were due so Mother was busy in town, otherwise they wouldn't have managed to spend so much of the day away from their regular duties.

She would absolutely not mention the extra packets of healing herbs and bandages that were hidden in the sewing kit her maids were carrying around just in case.

They had all, even Mother to a degree, been nervous as Wei Wuxian left for the Nightless City. Their feelings had not been helped by the fact that no one could figure out what exactly Wen Ruohan wanted with him when Father's enquiries to the other sects had yielded no solid results.

Wen Ruohan had dallied with a few lovers in the past, but all were women and more or less willing. Wei Wuxian was certainly smart and talented enough to have caught Wen Ruohan's attention, but the man tended to go for those with distinctly unique talents when it came to bringing them into his sect, like Wen Zhuliu. And he certainly didn't treat those people like he had Wei Wuxian at the banquet. He also wouldn't demand their continued presence so publicly like he had either.

And if Wen Ruohan was going to kill someone, he tends to just kill them with impunity unless they were of particularly high status, and if they were then they disappeared or met with "accidents", like former Sect Leader Nie.

Several people had suspected it was a test for the other sects, like the seating at the Discussion Conference, or the Waterborne Abyss driven into Gusu territory, but no one could



tell what kind of test it was.

She didn't know what state her little brother would return in or *if he even will*. And there wasn't anything any of them could do about it.

Father had debated having Wei Wuxian pretend to be sick or go into seclusion, but they'd all known it wouldn't work. Wen Ruohan had been fairly obvious in his threat to have Wei Wuxian appear.

A-Xian had laughed it off, saying it wasn't like it was a big loss even if Wen Ruohan did kill him, and better him than Jiang Cheng or Jiang Yanli. None of them except Mother had been even remotely happy at that statement.

It had been all Jiang Yanli had been able to do to not see him off in tears when he left, and A-Cheng had only let go of A-Xian's sleeve when Madam Yu had berated him.

Their last glance of Wei Wuxian had been of him flying away backwards so he could wave at them until Madam Yu yelled at him to stop being ridiculous and that he's embarrassing their sect.

It was two hours after lunch when a call came from their lookouts, and A-Xian appeared on the horizon.

Both she and A-Cheng dropped what they were doing and ran for the gates.

A-Xian's flight path seemed steady, and his pace moved from reserved to absolutely breakneck speeds the moment he spotted them. There were no obvious injuries from a distance, though that didn't mean anything given his willingness and ability to bury his various wounds to supposedly not worry them.

When he landed, he quickly flipped Suibian into its scabbard and then rushed to meet them. "Are you okay?" Jiang Cheng snapped. "Did that monster hurt you?"

Wei Wuxian smiled brightly at them, "I'm fine!" He even threw his arms wide and twirled, letting out a laugh. "See! Not a hair out of place."

"As if anyone could tell with your rat's nest!" Jiang Cheng snapped.

Except, his hair wasn't pulled back in its normal careless, messy tail.

It was in his customary high ponytail, but his hair was clean and done up high, his bangs looking more artful than haphazard even after his long flight. Jiang Yanli carefully reached out, tugging on one of the braids mixed into his hair that spilled over his shoulder from his spin. Wei Wuxian had never really been one to have the patience to braid his own hair, and while he'd sit still if Jiang Yanli asked him to, he'd get fidgety so she didn't do that too often, and certainly not for long enough to get the number of twists she was seeing.

"Ahh, sorry Shijie! I forgot to take them out! Sect Leader Wen insisted on having my hair done all up, and I didn't argue since Uncle Jiang told me to follow his orders so I didn't get in trouble. Did you know Sect Leader Wen had me learning the Wen doctrines and rules! And I

had to memorize the entire *Quintessence of the Wen Clan* ! And there were so many sword drills Shijie! Your Xianxian had no time to play at all!”

She smiled as carefully as she could, not wanting to think of the reasons Sect Leader would have for wanting A-Xian's hair done up, or why he would want him to learn how to be a Wen.

“Don’t even joke right now!” A-Cheng hissed, swatting A-Xian over the head.

“Ahh! Shijie! Jiang Cheng is being so mean to your Xianxian!”

She couldn’t help but laugh a little, though it came out a little strained. “Then Xianxian should tell Shijie and A-Cheng everything that happened so we stop worrying.”

He pouted, and A-Cheng hit his shoulder in response. “Stop it, seriously! Is there anything really bad that we should get taken care of before we see Father?”

A-Xian shook his head almost dramatically. “Nope! Seriously, it's weird, but really it was like going to school at Cloud Recesses except with better food!”

A-Cheng looked questioningly at her, and all she could do was nod reassuringly even if she herself wasn’t really that confident with the situation. She quickly stepped in between the two, linking arms with them both. “Well then let’s go set Father’s mind at ease and have you give a report, hmm?”

A-Xian laughed as she started pulling both of them in the direction of their Father’s study.

“Are you sure they didn't hurt you? And not like, your version of hurt, but like normal people?” A-Cheng asked. “Like, there were no knives or whips involved or anything?”

A-Xian shook his head dramatically again. “No! Well, there were knives, but they were gifts? He gave me ten knives! What am I going to do with ten! None of them are even balanced for throwing!”

Jiang Yanli glanced around A-Xian at A-Cheng, who looked equally askance at that. A-Xian just huffed at the two of them. Given everything else factoring into this situation, it wasn't a shock that Wen Ruohan would try to bribe A-Xian, and as dense as her A-Xian liked to play at, he had to know those gifts could be seen as bribes even if they were called gifts. Especially if he had received a lot of them. While she knew that A-Xian wouldn’t reveal any clan secrets since he really doesn’t care about material things, well, not everyone would believe that.

“Did he give you many gifts?” She asked lightly.

“Some,” he frowned. “Not like I really needed anything. In between shijie’s cooking and everything else the Jiangs have given me I have more than enough stuff.”

Before they could ask much more, they arrived at Father’s study. The door was open as it always was unless Father was working on something particularly sensitive, and so the three of them headed in, using a quick flare of spiritual energy to notify him of their arrival.

“Wei Wuxian!” Jiang Fengmian grinned as he quickly rose from his desk and rushed over to meet them.

A-Xian bowed jauntily. “Uncle Jiang! Sorry if this one made you wait!”

“Are you alright, you aren’t injured at all?” Father asked as he grasped A-Xian by the shoulders, looking him over.

A-Xian shook his head wildly with a flamboyant grin. “I’m perfectly fine!” He slipped from his hands to give another twirl for Father’s inspection, a laugh ringing through the office. Before they could ask him anything else he launched into a story of his journey. From Wen Ruohan meeting him on his arrival, to the many dinners, even to the training the man had been putting him through. He also explained the gifts, though he glossed them over in an almost nervous manner.

Father still looked unsure but finally he nodded. “If that’s all, I believe you. At least this whole thing is over now.”

Wei Wuxian suddenly hunched a little, looking nervous and a little sad. “It isn’t. He wants me to visit again in two weeks.”

Father frowned, “has he given any indication as to why?”

“He didn’t give a reason,” A-Xian muttered, looking down.

“That’s doubtful!” Mother spat from behind her, making Jiang Yanli jump just a little. All four of them spun to face the door to the study where Madam Yu was standing tall, flanked by her maids.

Her face looked like a thunderstorm, and there was the smell of lightning in the air. She glanced quickly at Zidian on Mother’s hand, and was grateful to see it wasn’t sparking yet.

“What did he ask you, hah?! What tales did your silver tongue spin for that mad man?!”

“Nothing, Madam Yu!” A-Xian quickly replied.

“How foolish do you think I am!” She spun on Father, glaring at him. “And you believe this pile of falsehoods! We need to learn what secrets that wretched brat spilled!”

With that she waved her hand sharply and Jinzhu and Yinzhu quickly grabbed A-Xian’s shoulders and dropped him to his knees.

“Mother!” Jiang Yanli cried.

“My Lad-”

“Don’t you argue with me! Are you so soft on this damn brat that you’d allow him to disregard your orders like they were nothing?! Search him!”

Jinzhu and Yinzhu quickly combed through A-Xian's robes. The end result was three qiankun pouches that were quickly emptied onto the floor.

One pouch contained everything A-Xian had taken to Qishan. Out of the others poured what must be the gifts he'd mentioned.

There were the knives he'd told them about, but that was just the start of it. Not only were there piles of talisman papers with cinnabar and various shades of ink sticks, there were bags and jars of spell materials, multiple books and scrolls, jewelry, headpieces and rings, boots, multiple pairs of the wrist bracers, several belts, and lastly ten sets of richly decorated robes that from the way it flowed, had to be made of jin-silk. The robes and belts were all richly embroidered at the hems, and Jiang Yanli gasped as she noted three of the robes had the sheen of beetle wings at their collars.

She had exactly one piece with anything close to that, a piece with feathers, and that was the robe that Father had gifted her for her coming of age. Jiang Cheng had two similar robes, for accompanying their father to various events with other sects.

Without a doubt, A-Xian had not just received "some" gifts. He'd received a fortune. Her mind quickly cataloged the pieces. They wouldn't cover all of Lotus' Piers whole budget, but if sold they'd get the equivalent to a solid year or two of nighthunting expenses at least.

"Ha!" Madam Yu spit. She spun on A-Xian. "You don't get such things like that for nothing!"

Before anyone but perhaps A-Xian, as careful and watchful as he was around everyone but her, could react, Mother whirled around, lashing out and slapping Wei Wuxian hard enough he hit the ground.

"Mother!" Jiang Yanli cried, hoping she could stop this. If she tried to interfere physically, Mother would just have her maids hold her back, and A-Xian would be hurt twice as badly. That was always how it went.

"Stop defending this servant! First he wrecked your betrothal, then he offended the Lans, now he sells us out for a few paltry presents!" She waved her hand again and Jinzhu slipped a discipline whip into her grasp. With a sharp crack she brings it down on A-Xian, who barely manages to shift so it hits his back rather than his soft, more painful sides.

"What did you tell Wen Ruohan, huh? Did you speak of our defenses? What allies of ours that your stupidity hasn't alienated?" She brings it down twice more.

"Nothing!" A-Xian cried. "I didn't say anything!"

"Lies!" The whip cracked again. "What else would give him reason to give you that trash! If you didn't tell him anything, then did you let him dishonor you?!"

"Enough, my lady!" Father finally snapped. "I believe him if he says that Wen Ruohan didn't question him, nor did he divulge any of our sect's internal matters. Perhaps Wei Wuxian will learn more about what Wen Ruohan wants on his next visit."

Mother scowls darkly before turning to Jinzhu and Yinzhu. “Take all of this trash out to the courtyard and burn it!”

A-Xian made a pained keening. “Mad-”

She spun and whipped him again. “Did those petty little bribes make you think that you can talk back to me! Or do you think that they mean anything? That they've somehow made you more than you are? That they're worth more than the years you leached off us! Ungrateful wretch! Not only will they burn but you'll watch until they all turn to ash!”

Madam Yu grabbed his ear and dragged him out of the study. Jinzhu and Yinzhu quickly gathered all the gifts off the ground and rushed after them. Jiang Yanli was right on their heels, with Father and A-Cheng chasing after her.

By the time they made it to the courtyard, Madam Yu already had A-Xian on his knees, and they were gathering an audience. “Mother!” Jiang Yanli cried. Even if this had been Wei Wuxian's fault, which of course it wasn't, she trusted A-Xian, and no one, no one at all could control what Wen Ruohan chose to do which was why A-Xian had had to go in the first place.

And no matter what, this was something they should be dealing with behind closed doors.

“Stop defending this worthless brat A-Li! Am I the only one that cares about this family!?”

Her mother's maids had dropped the items in a pile, and at her signal, they both threw fire talismans onto the pile. In between the talisman paper, robes, and the other flammables, the entire pile went up. The silk took the longest to burn, along with the metals, and the smell of burnt flesh permeated the courtyard from the silk.

“Enough, My Lady.” Father finally sighed. “Enough.”

Mother scoffed, but finally released Wei Wuxian. She stormed back towards her rooms, scattering servants and disciples alike in her wake.

A-Cheng was faster than her in rushing to hold A-Xian up by his shoulders, but only barely.

“Take A-Xian to rest in his room,” Father ordered. “I need to speak with your mother.”

The three of them muttered their thanks before A-Cheng and she bundled A-Xian up and bolted. They heard Jiang Fengmian ordering the mess in the courtyard to be cleaned up as they got out of hearing range.

They made it to A-Xian's room without being stopped, and carefully laid him out on the bed. “Ah, so soft.”

A-Cheng scowled down at him. “It's your fault for provoking her. Couldn't you have just kept your mouth shut?”

“A-Cheng!” Jiang Yanli scolded even as she pulled loose A-Xian's robes so she could get a better view of the whip lashes. Luckily his golden core was already working on him, and the

bruises on his cheek were mostly healed from the slaps.

“It’s not like I could tell Wen Ruohan to not give me things! And I don’t care about them anyway so I didn’t lie!”

“Enough, both of you,” Jiang Yanli got out. “A-Cheng, would you bring me the bandages and ointments please? And A-Xian, stop provoking him and meditate.” She stared at both of her little brothers until they huffily complied with her, A-Xian settling into a lotus position while A-Cheng went over to the side cabinet that Jiang Yanli kept stocked with healing supplies.

*Please don’t let it be this bad next time*, she wished as she carefully peeled away A-Xian’s robes from the lashes. Her brothers didn’t deserve this.

## Chapter End Notes

Chapter one edited 03/02:

- Changes to the original fic section
- Good catch by Atrals on the discipline whip
- Few more spelling/grammar errors

Additional edits:

Oh my gosh, the amazing [Nonvocal Seagull \(FluffyTheTerrible\)](#) absolutely did an amazing job making this chapter a thousand times better!

# Chapter Two

## Chapter Notes

EDIT 12/22 - posted the revised version thanks to the wonderful [Nonvocal Seagull](#) ([FluffyTheTerrible](#)).

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Wen Ruohan did not stab the messenger that brought his spies' report of Wei Wuxian's homecoming, but he came close. The messenger was sent scurrying away with a sharp dismissal, leaving behind a detailed account of what transpired on top of the month's supply reports.

That haridan wife of Jiang Fengmian had not been quiet about her accusations, and even if she was, the sheer disregard their servants had for keeping household affairs behind closed doors had certainly spread word of what just happened. While no one knew yet what had become of Wei Wuxian after the Jiang brats rushed him to his room, what *did* get confirmed were that the remains of his burned gifts had to be cleared from the grounds, there was a blood trail leading from the sect leader's office to the courtyard, and up to Wei Wuxian's rooms that had to be cleaned, and that Jiang Yanli had apparently called for more bandages during the night.

He thought back to Wei Wuxian's apprehension about taking the gifts home, and only now realized that it wasn't just his normal, foolish, doubt of his own worthiness. Damn his spies for missing something like this in the first place, and damn them twice over again for underestimating what the reaction would be. He'll need to ensure their re-education would be thorough indeed.

He carefully picked up the scroll with the report, taking a breath to brace himself, before unraveling the ties to read it through.

His grandson was wasted on those fools.

Even if Jiang Fengmian only cared for Wei Wuxian as a head disciple, allowing his wife to discipline him the way she had was uncalled for. Especially since the report indicated a history of similar punishments, and worse still that none of the other disciples received the same level of vitriol as his grandson did.

That woman was obviously taking her marital issues out on the boy.

His fist tightened, crinkling the paper to the point where it would need to be re-written at some point, it took every ounce of his self control to not rush to Lotus Pier and burn it to the ground to reclaim his grandson. No... Wei Wuxian would survive this whipping as he had all the others before it, and in the end it would only serve to drive the boy closer to him.

When Wei Wuxian finally takes his rightful place by Wen Ruohan's side, he'll let the boy repay the pain a thousand-fold.

In the meantime, he'll take pleasure in replacing everything the bitch burned with even better gifts now that he had a better understanding of the boy.

He'd also take great joy in putting Jiang Fengmian's feet to the fire about it, he thought with a sharp grin as he dropped the report to reach for a blank scroll. Perhaps a letter to the man asking how Wei Wuxian liked a particular headpiece and a request that he wear it on his next visit?

He did so like watching his victims squirm before they died.

XxXxX

From the way he behaved, you would never be able to tell what Wei Wuxian had been subjected to upon his return to Yunmeng Jiang. Wen Ruohan had watched him carefully since his arrival, but there was no more apprehension in his behavior than his first visit.

He'd brushed off questions about how he'd liked the gifts, being effusive in his thanks but cagey over their use, and claiming to have packed in a rush and forgetting to take the "such precious items" out of where they had been stored where he "couldn't accidentally ruin them".

The only thing that seemed to have been spared from the flames were the pair of bracers that Wei Wuxian wore, the simplest of the ones Wen Rouhan had given him, plain black leather with a few silver rivets dotting the edges.

Wen Ruohan hadn't pushed the matter, instead coaxing Wei Wuxian to relax again, to treat the Nightless City like home.

He settled just as quickly, still smiled, conversed, and laughed. He'd even started teasing Xu-er a bit more, which Wen Ruohan found fairly hilarious as Xu-er clearly had no idea what to do with the friendly teasing so spent half his time snapping back and the rest just spluttering.

The first time he had tried to reciprocate, Wei Wuxian had laughed so hard and so loudly that he'd actually fallen over. The boy had clutched onto Xu-er in a hug to hold himself up, and his son looked as lost as a pampered pet dealing with a baby for the first time, even as he supported Wei Wuxian in a loose hold.

That look had made Wen Ruohan laugh as well. His son had such a sharp tongue when sniping at servants, peers, or idiots like Nie Mingjue, seeing him flounder over some light hearted ribbing was oddly touching.

Now that he thought about it, Xu-er had always been so focused on being a perfect heir, he doubts that he had ever just interacted with others informally. Oh, he'd gotten in the normal sorts of trouble young masters would end up in, the children of Wen Ruohan's advisors acting as close to friends as his oldest had made, but never doing anything without purpose.



Seeing Xu-er enjoy himself with his nephew warmed the part of Wen Ruohan's heart that still held sentimentality of his own times with his brothers and his cousins dear, before it soured into their deaths in the struggle for their father's position.

While he had no intention of dying soon, once he'd taken over the other sects, he plans to spend more time enjoying himself, experimenting and cultivating in seclusion. If the next two generations of Wen could sort out a hierarchy and avoid the same bloody conflict that had embroiled his own, that would be ideal.

Let the family tree grow and spread a bit.

And Wen Xu and Wei Wuxian did balance each other out so well.

Xu-er was quick, decisive and fierce, but he lacked the consideration and thoughtfulness that would let him truly shine. He often forgot that you did not just need to punish your enemies, but reward those that served you well, or to win them over so they *could* serve you well.

If Xu-er was put in charge of the clan, their enemies would not be able to gain any traction, but he'd have the court riled up in no time, with the way he constantly dismissed their ideas or accomplishments as inconsequential. Combined with his attitude, well, his court would not be peaceful in the least.

Wei Wuxian could certainly be decisive, and while Wen Ruohan would lay odds that when the chips were down his grandson could be as brutal as needed, he seemed at his core an apparently kind, nurturing, if slightly-flighty, peaceful person. He had the talent and charisma to be a good leader, but would not have the ruthlessness needed to be a great leader. He did appear happiest when he could support, interact with, and care for people.

If Wen Ruohan named Xu-er as his proxy, he could easily condition him to consider Wei Wuxian's words as an extension of his own, and likewise condition Wei Wuxian to step back if Xu-er made a decision he disagreed with.

And to complement Xu-er's lack of people skills, Wei Wuxian could be assigned to care for their people, the disciples and commoners alike, and he would undoubtedly be thrilled to do so. With Wei Wuxian's temperament as it is, for better or worse, he would pass most of the goodwill on to Xu-er, who would in turn ensure that they were safe, and that no one would take advantage of Wei Wuxian's naturally generous nature.

Now he can just get some worth out of Chao-er, everything will be perfect, he thought as he stared down at the courtyard where Wei Wuxian was playing tag with a dozen 7-9 year old disciples under the guise of situational awareness training. After watching the way his grandson's eyes would shine with joy whenever he mentioned training his youngest shidish, he'd suspected that the boy would thrive with the Wen children just as he did with the Yunmeng Jiang ones, so had arranged to have him stumble across a training session a few days ago.

Sure enough the boy had quickly been drawn into the class, and he had so much fun he'd been particularly talkative at dinner.

Wen Ruahan had learned more about the “absolutely adorable” brats than he absolutely wanted to know, but his grandson’s joy had made it worth it.

From the instructor’s reports, Wei Wuxian had let the disciples run a bit wild, but they knew their place and rightly let his grandson do whatever he wanted. On top of live testing fire talismans, this also ultimately involved giving into the brats begging him to come back and teach them the next day. Seeing him so engaged with his proper sect was enough incentive for Wen Ruohan to lighten the practice load and required reading Wei Wuxian needed to complete before being set free to play with the children.

Naturally Wei Wuxian had finished it all perfectly and in record time.

While he had figured that it’d be the obvious final result, even he’d been surprised and proud beyond measure when in just the four days that he spent with them, all of the children had shown marked improvements across the board.

Wei Wuxian was truly excellent with the children and had the teachers singing his praises for how well he interacted with them and the progress he inspired. While he could tell they'd exaggerated his grandson's teaching prowess with the expected flattery of someone seeking approval from a superior, the words didn't ring as hollow as the things they reported about Chao-er.

He was able to connect with the children easily, and could quickly spot areas they might be struggling in, and rather than just telling the children to do better or practice harder, he would find ways to circle around the subject with them until they connected with it.

He was half tempted to let the boy loose amongst the older disciples to see what gains could be made there, but Wei Wuxian didn’t have the proficiency in the Wen style to be working with the advanced classes just yet. It would only alienate the boy to be placed with them. It would likely appear as if he wanted them to pick apart the Jiang elements that still permeated his style. The children were learning the basics taught by any half decent sect, while the older ones would be learning sword arts, clan-specific techniques and methodology, and... another thing the boy wasn’t ready for, tactics to aid in the upcoming takeover of the other sects.

Wei Wuxian spending the rest of his visit time split between learning, wandering around with Xu-er, and training the brats remained the best plan.

It would keep the family meals peaceful.

XxXxX

“And how would you modify a fire talisman to achieve the same result?” Wen Ruohan asked Wei Wuxian as he paced around the boy standing at attention in the middle of the courtyard, questioning him on his spell work. Wei Wuxian had just mastered a basic Wen flame spell in three days, though he’d unknowingly been working on the principles since his first visit.

It took most disciples months to learn, and the excessive drain it caused on one’s spiritual energy for even a small burst of fire meant it didn't have much use outside of being showy for

the other sects since they couldn't figure out the trick behind it, or starting a campfire on a nighthunt if you were feeling particularly lazy and didn't want to draw a talisman.

The boy looked thoughtful, and his hands unconsciously tracing the air in front of him, twisting a bit, and Wen Rouhan could practically see the lines of the talisman being drawn.

"I'd inverse the right radical, and create a feedback loop for the air flow, that would reduce the intensity and keep it in a smaller ball than the jet of fire a talisman causes."

Wen Ruohan nodded. "How would you take the principle for this and apply it to a qi manifestation?"

"The qi build up can be enhanced by the surrounding area if you feed the energy from the surrounding air into your manifestation." Wen Ruohan nodded. Wei Wuxian opened his mouth to say something else before he suddenly looked nervous and his jaw snapped shut. Wen Ruohan frowned.

"What were you about to say?"

"It's nothing."

"What you intend to say is never nothing. Speak."

Wei Wuxian still looked apprehensive, but he nodded to himself and moved forward. "If it's with qi, if you tie it to a spiritual resonance you'd be able to get it to flare if someone with a certain pattern entered range. You can turn it into an early warning system."

Wen Ruohan smiled. "Excellent idea. Let's see if it works."

XxXxX

Wen Ruohan had ordered a veritable feast for his grandson's last night in Qishan, so *of course* Chao-er finally deigned to pull himself out from whatever whorehouse he had hunkered himself in and stumble home for it.

Really, his youngest had a wife and three concubines, on top of his constant rotation of bedmates. He was nearly as bad as Jin Guangshan, but at least that disgusting oaf could hit the mark when it came to getting a woman with child, whereas Chao-er failed even at that.

You'd think that Chao-er could get better at that, at least.

He'd decided he quite liked being a grandfather, after all.

Xu-er was unlikely to marry any time soon and had showed only passing interest in sex, so Chao-er would need to step up in providing them. Yes, that would be the use Chao-er could fulfill after the war. Give him more grandchildren to spoil.

Perhaps he should talk to Wen Qing to help ensure the brat could complete the task since he had failed so far? She'd be able to figure out what Chao-er was doing wrong.

Though, Wen Ruohan would need to re-direct Chao-er back to his wife, who was a smart, tenacious lady, or at least someone with better standards than his usual air-headed bimbos, as his grandchildren would need to inherit their mother's brains given their father certainly had none.

Chao-er's superior blood was wasted on him, given that he thought that was all that was needed, being too lazy to truly take advantage of it.

He'd spent half the dinner sniping at Wei Wuxian, who showed a remarkable restraint in his retorts. It certainly wasn't helping that Xu-er found everything entirely entertaining, interjecting himself in the conversation at Wei Wuxian's side. His grandson kept side-eyeing him, as if afraid that Wen Ruohan would be offended.

Bah, as if his grandson could do anything to offend him. Given the boy's upbringing by those fickle, foolish Jiangs and his grandson's kind, loyal, heart, even Wei Wuxian moving against Wen Ruohan would be understandable. The worst that would happen is that Wen Ruohan would likely be a bit upset that he'd been unable to convince the boy of the righteousness of his cause. All he'd do in that case is have Wei Wuxian confined to his rooms to keep him safe, perhaps seal his spiritual power so the clever boy couldn't escape until he fully reflected on his actions and accepted his position.

Instead of intervening Wei Wuxian establishing his place in the family with Xu-er's helpful interjections, Wen Ruohan merely leaned back in his chair, sipping his wine and watching the commotion, like a cat watching a cornered rat trying to take on a kitten that had just learned its claws could hurt things while an older sibling showed him how to toy with it.

He couldn't wait until Wei Wuxian reached the point he could be sent afield with Xu-er. The two would be a sight to behold.

They certainly knew how to handle themselves, and how to read a situation, unlike his youngest son, who had case in point just lost his temper, jumping to his feet and slamming his hands down on the table, scattering the dishes and spilling what was truly an excellent fruit wine.

"How dare you!" Chao-er spluttered. "You're only here by my father's graces you dirty guttersnipe!"

"Chao-er!" Wen Ruohan snapped, finally having enough. The last thing that he wanted was Wei Wuxian doubting his place as he likely did with the Jiang. "Wei Wuxian is more welcome here than you are at the moment, and he certainly knows better how to behave! Have some sense and sit back down!"

All three of his boys stared at him, Xu-er with a cruel little smirk that meant he was truly enjoying himself, Wei Wuxian in awed shock, and Chao-er with a shocked, disbelieving, half afraid look.

"Have you gone deaf?" He took a sip of his wine as he glared at Chao-er who dropped down, cowering in his seat.

How useless.

“Have some more of the chicken, Wei Wuxian,” he nodded towards the dish. “The ginger is particularly flavorful this season.”

“Yes, Sect Leader Wen,” his grandson said. He took a few pieces, though his eyes stayed locked on him.

Wen Ruohan mentally sighed. He couldn’t wait for the day that he finally got through to his grandson that the boy could commit murder and Wen Ruohan would happily help him hang the corpse on the gates and dare people to comment.

XxXxX

Wen Ruohan watched as Wei Wuxian flew off.

It was... harder... than the last time.

Was it because he knew of the bitch that would be waiting for him? Or merely that it would be so long until he saw him again?

He’d told Wei Wuxian he would need to return in another two weeks, though he’d been tempted to say days. If he didn’t think that the boy would encounter excessive issues regarding his “neglected duties” he would have ignored his need to return to the Jiang entirely and insist he just stay.

He took some joy in doubling the amount of gifts he had sent Wei Wuxian back to the Jiang with. He’d also insisted that the various items should be used daily, as gifts were worthless if not enjoyed so he expected them to be brought back the next time with signs of use. Keeping a few trinkets in pristine condition was nowhere near as precious as Wei Wuxian’s happiness. The boy had swallowed, but bowed in acquiescence.

Unbeknownst to the boy, Wen Ruohan had sent another letter to Jiang Fengmian ahead of him, making a few pointed comments about how he worried that the boy didn’t like his gifts as they had not made a reappearance, and how perhaps the man could offer some insight into Wei Wuxian’s tastes. If there was also a line about him coming back hale and whole on his next visit, well, that was merely common courtesy.

Wen Ruohan didn’t expect anything more than a polite reply, though he was certain it would safeguard Wei Wuxian from the same treatment he had received the last time.

He waved Qian Heng over after Wei Wuxian had flown past his sight. “Summon Wen Qing, I want her and her brother here during Wei Wuxian’s next visit.”

They’d been at Cloud Recesses at the same time, and Wei Wuxian had cared enough for the younger of the two to speak up for him at the Discussion Conference, so there was obviously some level of attachment there.

Perhaps some additional time together would cause those bonds to deepen and further tie Wei Wuxian to the Wen? Perhaps even replace the affection that he felt for Jiang Yanli?

He'd also be able to consult Wen Qing on Chao-er's potential affliction.

Either he'd get more grandchildren out of his second born, or he'd need to consider re-marrying himself. Xu-er would marry if Wen Ruohan ordered it, but he would likely only do his conjugal duties sparsely which was not conducive to the amount of grandchildren he found himself desiring.

XxXxX

Wei Wuxian stopped at Yiling again on his way back. It didn't take him long to find the rock outcrop he had changed behind last time, repeating his previous actions and changing his clothes.

While Wen Ruohan insisted that the gifts were for him to use, they were too nice for the types of scrapes that Wei Wuxian regularly found himself in. He tended to be a bit foolhardy after all, always jumping into messes. He also didn't want to risk Wen Ruohan being upset if Madam Yu destroyed them again.

He could understand her point of view though, after all the chief cultivator had little reason to grant him such finery. Even if they weren't bribes, it would still appear to the outside that Wei Wuxian could and had been bought. And he'd rightfully deserved punishment if he had betrayed the Jiang by accepting a payoff for giving away information or whatever other reason. Also just aesthetically, the robes were of a much nicer quality than most of Jiang Cheng's own apparel, and having the first disciple dress so much more finely than the sect heir did not present a good image for Yunmeng Jiang.

Still, Wei Wuxian did not want to risk the pieces that he had been gifted with this time. More than a few even appeared to be heirlooms. With that in mind, he quickly took everything out of the two pouches he was carrying on top of the one he had originally taken with him to the Nightless City. It was short work to sort between the gifts that were likely replaceable if damaged and the things that weren't.

For some unfathomable reason, one of the gifts was a silver headpiece, framing a red gemstone the size of a loquat that Wen Ruohan had told him was originally intended for the love of his life before she left him. Wei Wuxian had just bowed, unsure of what to say.

After sorting everything, Wei Wuxian shifted a few rocks then dug down into the dirt, enough to create a small hole and he dropped the bag with the more valuable gifts in. A few quick strokes of his fingers and a few dabs of cinnabar and blood created a ward that would toss back anyone that dared touch it. The symbol glinted in the light, burning almost glasslike into the sand.

Wei Wuxian carefully shifted the rocks back to cover the hole and the markings. Hopefully they'll keep the bag safe until his next trip to the Nightless City.

XxXxX

Jiang Yanli stayed quietly seated at the table laid out with the welcome meal she had carefully prepared for Wei Wuxian as Mother tore into him. A-Cheng was hunched by her

side as much as he could while still maintaining the upright posture that would keep Mother from turning her ire on him. Across from Jiang Yanli, Father just looked tired as he watched Mother.

Wei Wuxian had returned with another qiankun pouch of gifts that he had been quick to show Father, along with Wen Ruohan's words that he expected them to show some usage on his return.

She clenched her fists.

Damn that Wen Ruohan. Mother already disliked A-Xian enough without the man lavishing his attention on him. Half their allies now asked about Wei Wuxian in their missives, some even sending small gifts to court his favor even as Wen Ruohan seemed to favor him so. The compliments and flattery A-Xian received due to the situation far outstripped anything that anyone had ever directed at A-Cheng. A-Cheng could be so gruff and short tempered, especially when intimidated to formal politeness because he did not want to disappoint their parents that he had a hard time connecting to people, everyone around them knew and cared for A-Xian, his open, friendly air with his freely given, honest compliments for anyone in his path making it easy to like him.

Mother had put Jiang Cheng through his paces everyday over the fortnight Wei Wuxian was at the Nightless City, insisting that he take the time to train "without that idiot distracting you". He'd been pushed in the training yard until he could barely stand, and then drilled on family histories, politics, and trade until dinner.

Yanli had arranged for his meals to be brought to his room each night, joining him whenever she could so he could rest without having to be drawn into the near constant arguments between Mother and Father. The two were even more at odds than normal given the resurgence of rumors around Wei Wuxian and blatant favoritism towards him.

All of the disciples made themselves scarce when not required to be on the training grounds to try and avoid the incensed Violet Spider. Mother didn't make it easy, hunting down anyone she deemed to be "like that idiot, shirking his duties to Yunmeng Jiang to laze about the Nightless City like a kept pet" and running them through drills til they dropped.

When A-Xian had gotten back, A-Cheng hadn't known whether to be happy or mad when Madam Yu refocused her on the first disciple.

Luckily Father had stopped her from destroying the gifts this time, stating the letter from the Chief Cultivator and his warning to A-Xian. Mother had called him five types of coward before she started in on A-Xian. She made him wear the nice robes in training, and demanded his hair be done up properly in the ornaments. After all, if Wen Ruohan wanted to be sure the things would be used and Wei Wuxian treasured them so much, they could hardly disappoint either of them.

Helping her exhausted, stressed A-Xian clean and mend things each night, trying to do what they could to keep them from getting ruined while Wei Wuxian went over training records and his other ministerial duties as they went made for long nights these days.

XxXxX

When Madam Yu finally declared that Wei Wuxian was done for the day, turning on her heel and storming off towards her rooms, Wei Wuxian collapsed onto the ground, too tired to move any further.

Luckily, all the other disciples had long since finished their sword drills and had been sent to the archery field for practice, to their written studies, or on night hunts for the older ones. Ignoring the dirt sullyng the too nice robes gifted by Wen Ruohan that Madam Yu had insisted he wear for his training, hoping that Shijie would be able to tell him how to clean them later, he rolled over to look up at the bright blue sky.

He would never admit it, especially since it was Wen Ruohan's interest that caused all these issues in the first place, however he might possibly, *just maybe*, be looking forward to returning to the Nightless City.

Dealing with the danger of Wen Ruohan was one thing, but at least he's familiar with the threat.

Madam Yu had been touchier than usual lately, with even more things setting her off. He didn't know how to balance her temper to spare his shidis from her wrath and to protect himself at the same time anymore.

He knew objectively that Wen Ruohan was evil. Like, that wasn't really a question. His sect caused a lot of problems, like the Waterborne Abyss that they had pushed from their territory to the Lan's rather than properly deal with it themselves and the nighthunts they ignored only for the creatures to harry the other sects, but...

But...

He'd only been there twice, but it already felt as much like home as Yunmeng Jiang.

He didn't have to pretend there. To carefully gauge his progress and skills so he was the perfect balance between "holding back" and "showing up" Jiang Cheng.

If he had an idea, Wen Ruohan encouraged him to speak of it, to test it and see what happened rather than scream at him for not following the correct teachings or paths.

He was fairly certain that he could say whatever he liked, so long as it did not offend Wen Ruohan, and even then, it didn't seem like much did.

He could be himself and meet his match in the people around him, like he belonged without trying.



Hey all hope you like this! The next chapter won't be out as quick, I need to re-work a few things in the first chapter, and I have work. It also feels a bit short, but the next scene was running long and I didn't want to break it up.

# Chapter Three

## Chapter Notes

Additional edits:

Posting the edits thanks to the amazing [Nonvocal Seagull \(FluffyTheTerrible\)](#)!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Wen Ruohan took some amusement in watching his servants squirm as he stood waiting for Wei Wuxian to arrive.

Oh, they were too well trained to fidget or otherwise make nuisances of themselves, but they all had that slightly uncomfortable air of people that were made to wait with no set end in sight.

To amuse himself as he waited, he made bets with himself on which one's training would break and how, taking some of the edge of that horrible, damned feeling of impatience that had him up and planting himself at the top of the stairs leading to the palace at the earliest estimated time for Wei Wuxian to arrive. He could easily pass the time by meditating here as opposed to his office, however his servants could not do the same as they need to stay on alert should he have need of them.

Right on cue, one of his servants glanced up at the sky, interrupting his plans of having matching bow and quiver sets commissioned for his boys (the ones he likes, not Chao-er) when Wei Wuxian appeared on the horizon.

Wen Ruohan couldn't quite restrain his smile as everyone around him snapped to perfect attention.

The time it took the boy to land was unacceptable to him. Perhaps Wen Ruohan could nudge his grandson towards improving teleportation talismans or traveling mirrors? The travel time between wherever his grandson happened to be and Wen Ruohan if he wanted to see the boy is too long.

That type of challenge would be right up his alley, and would be a fabulous benefit to the sect when it comes to moving forces around the various supervisory offices being planned. Especially since distance between the two would in no way be reduced between here and there as Wei Wuxian would be given Lotus Pier.

"Wei Wuxian," he grinned as soon as the boy touched down.

Hmmm, the boy had a sort of forced cheer about him, almost like the first few days of his first visit, except his nervousness had ramped up to a degree that Wen Ruohan would have found objectively annoying on anyone else.

“Sect Leader Wen!” Wei Wuxian greeted effusively, bowing quickly even as Wen Ruohan waved the formality off. There was no need to be formal in this type of setting. Wei Wuxian cocked his head just a tad like Wen Ruohan had seen him do several other times when the boy tried to puzzle through a problem.

“Have you eaten yet today?” Wen Ruohan asked, hoping to get ahead of his awkward fumbling and give the boy time to figure out whatever he was nervous about.

Wei Wuxian nodded, a bright grin taking over his face. “Yes! Shijie made sure I ate, and even packed me spicy pork buns that she made just for me for the trip!” He quickly pulled out a qiankun pouch, digging out a decently sized cloth package with a talisman stuck to the outside that Wen Ruohan could now easily recognize as one of Wei Wuxian’s custom ones.

Wei Wuxian made quick work of unwrapping the talisman and cloth, and held up the buns for Wen Ruohan’s inspection. “Shijie makes the best food, you should try one!” He offered. Wen Ruohan blinked for a moment before accepting one of the buns.

Wei Wuxian somehow brightened even more, snagging one for himself before rewrapping the package and tossing it back in his pouch. Wen Ruohan inspected the bun idly as he waved his grandson to follow him to his chambers. Even though this was only his third visit, it felt almost routine at this point, ensuring that there was a warm bath waiting for the boy so he could wash away the remnants of the filthy creatures that held him down and tried to tarnish his glory with their dirty, grasping hands.

The boy’s slightly fast idle chatter filled the air as they walked side by side towards the family quarters, Wen Ruohan guiding them down another long, winding path rather than taking a direct path.

Wei Wuxian occasionally paused to take a bite out of his bun, chewing and humming happily in appreciation as he let it linger on his tongue a moment before swallowing. The filling was a slightly alarming red, obviously made to cater to Wei Wuxian’s love of spice. It made Wen Ruohan rather apprehensive to take a bite of his own, but his grandson’s glances at the uneaten bun in his hand had him gamely nibbling at it as they passed a courtyard with a pond. He can dunk his head in if it was too over the top.

His eyes widened a bit in surprise as the flavor hit him, and he took a bigger bite as another grin split Wei Wuxian’s face.

The bun was delicious. It was certainly spicy, but not alarmingly so. It blended well with the sauce to keep it from being overpowering, and the meat was tender and practically melted in his mouth. There were pieces of lotus root and other vegetables mixed in the filling as well, rounding out the flavors and textures.

“See! I told you Shijie makes incredible food! You should try her lotus and pork rib soup! It’s the best thing ever!”

“I’ll look forward to it then,” Wen Ruohan smiled at him indulgently. When discussing Lotus Pier, Jiang Yanli was the only one that Wei Wuxian called “Shijie”. There were several younger disciples that he called shidi, including Jiang Wanyin on occasion, though most often

then not he called him Jiang Cheng, but all the other female disciples of the Yunmeng Jiang were called by their names or various teasing nicknames and nothing else.

Shijie was reserved for Jiang Yanli alone, and Wei Wuxian's affection for her was open, effervescent, and unapologetic no matter how much he tried to bury it in caution or formality when he thought to watch his words.

From what Wen Ruohan had gathered from the conversations, along with the additional reports his spies delivered, Wei Wuxian truly thought of Jiang Yanli like a sister and not in a romantic manner. He would need to meet the young lady to know for certain, but he felt that she likely felt the same for him. If that was the case, then Wen Ruohan had no issues with ensuring she was as well taken care of as Wen Ning, if not more so.

Perhaps he would even arrange to have the two of them wed? That way both Wei Wuxian and Wen Qing could be assured that their siblings will be well taken care of. The wedded pair could even split their time between Dafan Mountain or Yiling with Wen Qing and Lotus Pier with Wei Wuxian, tying them more closely together and everyone would be happy.

Or perhaps he could assign Wen Qing as Wei Wuxian's advisor in Lotus Pier initially? He'd need to rethink his plan for Yiling in that case if she could not lead the supervisory office there, but that might be workable...

Wei Wuxian's chattering trailed off as they reached his rooms, that nervous look returning a hundred fold. Wen Ruohan ushered the boy in, wanting as always to glance over the rooms one last time to make sure they were perfect before he made sure the boy could wash away any traces of Yunmeng Jiang, leaving only the young master of the Wen underneath.

The servant, what's his name, the one with half a brain that was Wei Wuxian's first personal servant had done an excellent job, everything was spotless and the door to the bath was ajar, revealing the steam rising from the filled tub. There were no other servants in the immediate hall, ensuring that Wei Wuxian would have all the privacy he needed as he bathed.

Perhaps once Wei Wuxian settled even more and truly accepted his place, Wen Ruohan could have Wen Qing look at the scars and see if there was any way to reduce them.

He'd just finished his quick inspection when Wei Wuxian finally seemed to gather his courage.

"Sect Leader Wen?" he asked.

"Yes?"

"Can I,-" he swallowed, "may I- I mean, now that we have privacy, may I ask you something?"

He looked over the boy, reassessing his current state.

Wei Wuxian had no injuries, and his earlier excitement as he spoke about his latest time at Lotus Pier hadn't been stained by any traces of fear or doubt, so it seemed unlikely the boy

planned to talk to him about a problem there or with Jiangs. In fact he seemed more cautious of Wen Ruohan, and focused on his reaction more than anything else.

Ahh...

So it was time for this conversation.

It was sooner than he expected, but his grandson truly did not cower from speaking his mind.

On one hand that was a very positive trait, on the other it was one that would need to be guided closely.

“Bathe first,” he smiled indulgently at his grandson, “we have plenty of time over your visit to talk.”

“Yes, Sect Leader Wen. It’s just that I don’t think I’ll be at ease until we have spoken.”

Wei Wuxian looked ready to argue this point to death, Wen Ruohan smiled. Ahhh, just as stubborn as his grandmother.

“Of course. Wash the road dust off first and then meet me in my office, we can talk then.” He smiled wider, playing his trump card for this visit. “You should clean up before dinner. Wen Qing and Wen Qionglin are here with some other guests as it is Xu-er’s birthday celebration next week.”

Wei Wuxian’s eyes widened. “His birthday? I didn’t know! I don’t have a gift for him!”

Wen Ruohan laughed. “I’ll ensure you have all the important family dates going forward, and I am sure you can think of something.”

As Wei Wuxian keened in worry, Wen Ruohan left him to his preparations, pretending not to hear him wail to himself about how little money he had on him to get Xu-er something nice.

Should he give him access to his accounts this visit? He’d been planning to do so later but perhaps it might be a good idea now, in order to help reassure him that he could get any gifts for his uncle that he so desired.

XxXxX

It took slightly longer than Wen Ruohan anticipated for Wei Wuxian to join him in his office, but Wen Ruohan couldn’t help but smile as he took in the sight of him.

Wen Ruohan would need to thank whichever servant that somehow managed to convince the boy to let them at his hair and encourage them to do so again in the future, for while his grandson was naturally blessed in terms of looks, instead of his normal, loosely tied ponytail, he looked especially dignified with his hair done half up in the beautiful silver headpiece containing the ruby that Wen Ruohan had intended as a gift for the boy’s grandmother. He wore one of the nicest sets of clothes that Wen Rouhan gifted him, a bright red under robe with a gray overrobe shot through with silver. Beetle wing and silver medallion dotted

embroidery ringed his collar and the matching belt, emphasizing his eyes and the whip cord leanness of his frame.

In short, Wei Wuxian looked incredible. His perfect grandson, dressed as he should be.

The only thing ruining his appearance was the continued nervousness evident on his face as he bowed and offered his greetings.

Logically, Wen Ruohan knew that it would take time for Wei Wuxian to trust him, poisoned as he is by the riff raff that raised him, but even so, a deep seated anger in the deep recesses of his spirit caused him to nearly snap the calligraphy brush he was jotting notes down with.

He'd, perhaps foolishly, hoped that during the time it took the boy to bathe he would settle his nerves and realize that there was nothing he could say that would cause Wen Ruohan to harm him.

He smiled at the boy, waving him to the small seating area where Wei Wuxian would occasionally study when not in the courtyard with Xu-er or in his own study room. "Come in, pour us some tea and I will be right over."

He hopes, again perhaps foolishly, that the familiar act of pouring them drinks in their usual, sociable setting will settle the boy anyhow.

Wen Ruohan carefully calculated the amount of time it takes him to finish reviewing his current document, allowing Wei Wuxian to carefully pour the tea and get comfortable. He joins the boy using careful, sure movements, trying to not spook him.

"Well," he asked him calmly as he sipped his tea, "what is it that you would like to speak to me about?"

It took the boy a few moments to answer, but when he did, his eyes were calm. "During my study at Cloud Recesses, a Waterborne Abyss appeared outside of Caiyi Town at Biling Lake." Wen Ruohan makes an encouraging noise. "From what could be determined, the Waterborne Abyss had been driven there from Qishan Wen territory." When Wen Ruohan did not immediately censure him, it seemed to give Wei Wuxian courage, as he rushed to continue. "And that is not the only time. There has been an increase in cultivators and night hunts encroaching from Wen territory into neighboring areas too. Is there something this humble one could assist with in order to help prevent those?"

Wen Ruohan tapped his fingers, glad to at least have these points out in the open for him to address with the boy. What felt concerning to him though was that Wei Wuxian looked, while not really afraid, like he was bracing for a hit. He painted his face with solemnity as he nodded, hoping his grandson took some reassurance from it.

"Hmm, well, I cannot speak for every night hunt or cultivator leaving my territory, I do know of the Waterborne Abyss. I ordered my people to resolve the situation, though I did not specify how. All I cared for was that it no longer troubled my people. I received a report that the matter was resolved successfully and left things at that."

He left out that he'd rewarded the senior disciple that thought to drive it into Lan territory with an advisory position, among other things.

"With the vast territory under Wen purview, there are always things that fall through the cracks, but if they are occurring at the rate that distresses you I will look into the details and have the situation addressed."

Wei Wuxian answered, his face impassive in a way that is trying to give nothing away and thus gave everything away as it is so different from the usual false smiles he hides behind. While Wen Ruohan should probably leave the discussion at this, he felt the need to address one last thing.

"Wei Wuxian," he stated gravely. The boy snapped to attention, watching him like a kitten watching an older cat that had discovered it using a favored napping space. No. No, that was not quite fitting. A young tiger just past cubhood running across a leopard for the first time felt more appropriate.

One new predator, cautiously watching another unknown one.

Wen Rouhan let out a small huff, leaning over to cup his cheek, running a thumb along his cheekbone under his silver gray eye. Those eyes, his grandmother's eyes, should never look at him with anything short of love and security in his safety.

"While in public I am absolute, but your place is above any other. Here, or anywhere in private, you need never fear to speak to me, to question. I will answer you truthfully and without violent repercussions to you or those you hold dear." For those he held dear would be those Wen Ruohan arranged for his safety and happiness, and would likewise never betray either of them.

Wei Wuxian didn't look entirely convinced, but Wen Ruohan felt momentarily reassured when he nodded his acceptance anyway.

The boy truly cared too much for those unworthy of his affection or worry.

Wen Rouhan sighed again, patting his cheek before pulling back to settle in his seat and sip at his tea.

Wen Qing would need to be assigned as his advisor, at least in the short term until Wen Ruohan could identify a more long term, permanent option for the position. She would be able to safely direct his impulses towards charity and protectiveness to where they could do the most good and be least likely to break his heart or get him taken advantage of.

It would save the inevitable conflict or further upsetting the boy when Wen Ruohan killed whoever dared to do so.

XxXxX

After he had chosen the least useful of his various advisors to punish for the "failures" that worried the boy, Wen Ruohan spent the time after Wei Wuxian left working on how to bring

his grandson on board.

From what he could gather, his best bet might just be to distract him with more children. If he drew Wei Wuxian into training more of the newest disciples, perhaps having him go on first hunts with some of the slightly older ones so he could feel engaged in creating additional “solutions” to his concerns, the boy would not only feel more engaged with the Wen Sect, but feel like an integral part of something.

Having him work with those young enough to naturally gravitate to his vivacious, outgoing personality but also old enough to appreciate his skill with more nuance than the youngest disciples earlier than planned would hardly hurt.

Wen Ruohan was in a good mood as he headed to the family dining room when dinner time approached, not only he had a plan mostly fleshed out for the rest of the boy’s visit, but also a plan to draw his grandson further into his rightful sect without forcing the issue. Not only that, Wen Qing would be there, and she could always be counted on to be an exceptional conversationalist on top of her usefulness.

It surely would be a relaxing evening.

“-teenth rule, actually, unless I’m mistaken, A-Xu?” Wei Wuxian’s lightly teasing voice chimed out into the hall.

When had Wei Wuxian gotten close enough to call Xu-er A-Xu? Not that he was complaining, mind you. It was an excellent development, but something inside him seethed just a little that his son had been the first to garner a more casual address from the boy.

When exactly will he be called zhufu? Or perhaps even yeye?

“You are correct,” Xu-er replied, sounding absolutely pleased with himself for it. “Wen Chao should know that as he has been studying our quintessence much longer.”

Ah, he’s about to undercut Chao-er. No wonder he was happy.

“Chao-er, copy the Quintessence of the Wen ten times and have it placed on my table by the end of the month,” he stated as he stepped into the dining room, taking account. Both his sons were there, along with Wei Wuxian, Wen Qing, Wen Qionglin, Wen Zhuliu, and a few of his other trusted advisors.

“Father!” Chao-er complained even as he jumped up to salute him along with everyone else.

“While Wei Wuxian’s ability to have memorized our texts so quickly does him credit, your own inability to remember something you have been instructed on since you were knee height does not do you any favors.”

He settled into his seat and a servant quickly poured him some wine, even as steaming dishes started streaming into the room.

Wei Wuxian is in his usual place to Wen Ruohan’s left, Wen Qing and Wen Qionglin next to him, he once again notes how Wen Qionglin stared at Wei Wuxian, though he looked away



each time his sister jostled his side.

The conversation started picking up after Wen Ruohan asked Wen Qing about her travels. She and her brother had arrived late that afternoon, and in turn prodded Wei Wuxian into sharing about his own travels.

There is a satisfied sounding thrum of light discussion from further down the table as the advisors and senior disciples he invited to dinner dug into the good food and wine, and the air at the top of the table relaxed.

As the evening wore on, Wei Wuxian relaxed again in the pleasant atmosphere, debating playfully with Wen Qing and Xu-er about everything from energy transfer methods to regional cuisines, with Wen Qionglin chiming in occasionally at his grandson's prompting.

Wen Ruohan had waved off joining the conversation himself, happy to lean back in contentment, enjoying the delicacies laid out for him and watching the fruits of his many years of existence come together so nicely.

How perfect an evening, truly something he wanted more often.

Xu-er's birthday banquet the following week had been a good reason to call his favorites together like this, but those situations were rare.

Perhaps he could throw more celebratory banquets?

He idly contemplated more excuses that he could use to host events so as not to come off like a hedonist of Jin Guangshan's stature, and was unhappy at how few there were.

His own birthday, the anniversary of him becoming Sect Leader, the birthdays of his children and grandson, Wen Qing and Wen Qionglin too. Wen Zhuliu would probably be terrified if Wen Ruohan celebrated the man's birthday with a banquet, which honestly would be entertaining enough for him to suggest it.

The founding of the current version of the sect by Wen Mao, perhaps a few other dates...

Bah...

Not enough.

Wen Qing would need to look over Chao-er first thing tomorrow morning.

He needed more grandchildren to celebrate.

"It's not like you care about other sects traditions anyway the way you grabbed that Lan crybaby's fucking virginity ribbon in front of everyone!" Chao-er snapped loudly at Wei Wuxian, shattering the pleasant atmosphere.

And the brat needed something to do other than interrupt Wen Ruohan's quiet evenings...

“Wha- how dare you! Lan Zhan is incredible! He isn’t a cry baby! He’s second on the list of eligible young masters for a reason! His calligraphy is beautiful and he fights like a dream!” He blinked. “Virginity ribbon?”

Before anyone could say anything else, Chao-er laughed derisively, an ugly sneer on his face. “You didn’t know those uptight fancy-ass pretty boys only let the people they fuck touch the things? And here I thought you were smart!”

“Oh no, I missed that part! No wonder he got so upset!”

It didn’t take a genius to realize the boy was upset. More than Wen Ruohan thought he’d ever seen him. Wen Qing immediately snapped at him to stop blubbering much like she would her younger brother even as Wen Qionglin started stuttering reassurances. Xu-er looked like he wanted to punch his own younger brother who was as smug as a snake at the successful verbal blow. Everyone else just looked like they would rather be anywhere else.

Wen Ruohan took a sip of his wine as he took in the way Xu-er started ripping into Chao-er with sharp words and brutal jabs. He mused on how Wei Wuxian had looked like a kitten contemplating a particularly fluttery feather when he talked about Lan Wangji, and how he’d been so defensive of him.

Now that he thought about it, many of Wei Wuxian’s stories of Cloud Recesses involved the Lan boy, and he seemed very invested in defending him for all that they reportedly argued like cats and dogs. It was like his grandson enjoyed pestering Lan Wangji.

Suddenly it hit him like the lacquered box that Wei Wuxian’s grandmother had accidentally broken his nose with when she’d been flirting with him. His eyes widened and while he did not spit out his wine, it was a close call.

Oh good heavens, he thought as he unconsciously clenched his fist enough to shatter his wine cup, causing the room to go absolutely silent.

His grandson had feelings for the Second Jade of Lan!

XxXxX

The next day, Wen Ruohan glared at the maps laid out across his table hard enough that they’d probably burst into flames if he could shoot qi from his eyes, which was honestly a good idea and he’d need to figure out if that was possible, the small figures indicating both his forces as well as those of the other sects would burst into flame. Xu-er was by his right, while the rest of his top disciples and advisors spread out across from them. None of them seem to understand the reason for why they’re reassessing Wen Ruohan’s opening gambits of clarifying his position atop the other sects, but they all obeyed accordingly, working through adjustments to his upcoming plans.

Wen Ruohan hoped that the adjustments would not be needed, but just in case his realization last night was not some wine-induced nightmare, he needed to make sure his grandson’s crush would be safe and not be overly antagonistic towards the boy when Xu-er pacifies his sect.

Would Lan Wangji have issues with Wei Wuxian if any of his family was hurt?

Though he should be grateful for the attention either way it was possible...

Maybe he can just threaten the branch disciples if the main branch of Lans won't cooperate...

Their supposed righteousness could drive them to protect innocents.

Once they were onboard, he'd then work out some suitable punishment for Lan Qiren. The man deserved it for throwing a book at his grandson and singling him out. No matter how amusing Wei Wuxian thought of it, the man should know his place.

To think Lan Qiren had been so blinded by his own ignorance he'd missed how incredible his grandson was! And he disliked Wen Ruohan's own daughter! The nerve of the man to think he could comment on Wen Ruohan's family!

He's just started to think that they had a solid solution to get to Qingheng-Jun and the Cloud Recess library with minimal bloodshed when a servant burst past the guards in a panic, throwing herself to the floor before him.

Wen Ruohan blinked.

It was one of the servants assigned to Wei Wuxian.

What in the-

"Sect Leader Wen! This servant begs you to go to the clan training grounds! Young Master Wei is in-" he doesn't let her finish before he's running towards his grandson, Wen Xu hot on his heels.

If some damned, puffed up idiot had not only intruded on his personal training grounds but also somehow managed to miss all of Wen Ruohan's pointed messages about Wei Wuxian's rightful place and was causing trouble for the boy, he'd be entertaining the soon-to-be dead man in his torture chambers for days.

He burst onto the balcony overseeing his private training grounds to see Wei Wuxian being held down by two of Chao-er's thugs, while his damned fool of a second son gloated over him.

A terrified Wen Qionglin was in the background, arms held out protectively in front of the slightly panicked dozen younger disciples Wei Wuxian had been teaching with the teacher cowering behind them.

His grandson grinned challengingly up at his uncle with fire in his eyes and an absolutely breathtaking amount of spirit. It was almost enough to distract from his swollen cheek.

Almost.

"Is that all you have, Young Master Wen? The maids at Lotus Pier hit harder." His grandson dared, voice unsurprisingly, tauntingly sing-song, grin widening.

Wen Chao of course gave in, too dumb to pay attention to his surroundings and recognize the danger he was in.

He raised his fist to strike again, and Wen Ruohan darted forward, backhanding his second son clear across the training grounds.

The grounds fell silent, and Wen Ruohan spun to see Xu-er already with his sword already at the throats of the two idiots holding his grandson. They wisely released him, and if they hadn't had the audacity to harm Wei Wuxian in the first place, Wen Ruohan might compliment them on how quickly they picked up the reality of the situation. Instead he sent them flying across the stone floor to join Chao-er on the ground with a flick of qi. Wei Wuxian stared up at him, surprise plain on his face.

"Father!" Wen Chao cried in shock. "Father he insu-"

"Did I say you could speak?" He glared at the waste of his blood. Wen Qing had completed a thorough check up on the brat, and had not found any physical impediments to Chao-er giving him more grandchildren, and his bedmates were all in perfect health as well. The boy couldn't even do the only thing he was good for properly and now he dared do this!

He scowled as he realized that Wen Zhuliu was nowhere in the training grounds. While it didn't explain everything, it explained why things had escalated as it had. Wen Zhuliu would have reminded Chao-er of Wei Wuxian's position and prevent any type of confrontation from coming to blows, because for all that the idiot condescended to the Core Melting Hand and ordered him about, he knew better than to argue with the man when he put his foot down in regards to following Wen Ruohan's will.

He'd need to find out how Chao-er had slipped his various leashes to the point that this happened. If it was one of the rare times when Wen Zhuliu was not immediately available, there should have been several other minders around him, making sure he didn't cause too much trouble, especially when he was in the Nightless City and risked annoying either himself or Xu-er.

Wen Ruohan leaned down, trailing his fingers over Wei Wuxian's swollen cheek. There was a spot of blood at the corner of his mouth. Wen Ruohan carefully placed his other hand behind his back, settling it at the base of his spine. While Wei Wuxian's own golden core was already speeding up the bruises and reducing the swelling at a quick rate, he still bit back a frown, feeding some of his own energy into the area, speeding the process. The boy had too much practice in using his core to deal with injuries.

The boy seemed, well, a hint of what Wen Ruohan would almost call awe flitted over his features as he looked up at Wen Ruohan.

It felt as heartwarming as much as it was unneeded.

Wen Ruohan protecting him should be a mere fact of life.

"What happened?" He asked his grandson, only to pause for a moment at the look that flashed over Wei Wuxian's face for an instant before being buried under one of his

grandson's false smiles.

Wen Ruohan blinked.

He hadn't even thought that Wei Wuxian could be as quietly furious as that.

"Just a simple disagreement, Sect Leader Wen, my apologies if you were disturbed." He was deliberately not looking at Chao-er, which gave Wen Ruohan a good idea of what had happened. Every now and then Chao-er would deign to visit the younger disciples, taking it upon himself to *share the glory of the best of Wen training*. Given that Wei Wuxian had, with his permission, turned a part of the training ground into a customized archery course for the group of children he taught regularly for the day, it only made sense that Chao-er would choose now to stick his nose into it.

"It must have been some disagreement," Wen Ruohan stated. "We will have this out here. Wei Wuxian, speak fully." For the first time since he'd met the boy, Wei Wuxian snapped his jaw shut and played mute. "Do you doubt my words?" He asked his grandson. Hadn't he just reassured the boy yesterday he could speak freely?

"Yeah that's right!" Wen Chao hurriedly shouted, possibly thinking he was defending himself. "You can't say anything because I'm right about that idiot being useless!"

Wen Ruohan almost sighed, about to give into the urge to rub his temples, except that taunt re-stoked Wei Wuxian's fighting spirit. "Wen Ning is a better shot than you! If you didn't beat him down and threaten the teachers for letting the other disciples succeed you wouldn't be ranked nearly as high! Maybe you should focus on practicing yourself rather than bothering others!"

"He's a waste of a bow!" Chao-er sneered. "He couldn't hit the broadside of a palace and you want *him* teaching!"

"He can hit every target on the course and is more helpful with the kids than you'd be in a thousand years with your attitude!"

"Pathe-"

"ENOUGH!" Wen Ruohan shouted. "This is a simple matter to address." He turned to Wen Qionglin. "Run the course and do your best."

"Sect Leader!" The boy started, eyes widening in terror at being singled out. The boy had none of his sister's spine, trembling like a mouse.

"If you succeed, then we will know Wei Wuxian is right. If you fail, I will have Chao-er take over training these disciples full time."

"Sect Leader Wen!" The teacher cried, and he glared at her for the audacity. She silenced herself, but there was a terrified defiance in her gaze as she looked between Chao-er and her charges.

That... That was worrying.

Chao-er hardly worked hard enough to be a top notch cultivator, but he was still Wen Ruohan's son and grew up receiving thorough training. He should still be able to impart some useful information to the disciples, especially given it was one of the few things he could be self-motivated for aside from women, wine, and spending Wen Ruohan's money.

None of the teachers had ever reported poorly of his occasional visits before.

Why did she seem so horrified at the thought of Chao-er having responsibility for her students that she risked angering him?

He turned back to Wen Qionglin, who'd managed to take several deep breaths, and shakily met Wen Ruohan's eyes the way a mouse would watch a lazing cat it stumbled across, wondering if it felt hungry.

A perfect example of why Wen Ruohan kept him on a tight leash. The last thing he needed was the boy accidentally injuring himself stupidly in his nervousness and upsetting his sister. Wen Ruohan nodded as encouragingly as he could manage, once again wondering how his cousin gave birth to two such disparate children, waving towards the makeshift obstacle course.

He would indulge his grandson in many more fanciful things than Wen Qionglin being good with a bow. Whatever the results were, if Wen Ruohan said they were good enough for Wei Wuxian to continue teaching with Wen Qionglin's help, that would be reality.

"You have this, Wen Ning!" Wei Wuxian called out, all the small disciples that had surrounded him doing the same. Hmm, it seemed they had taken to the timid teen as much as they had his grandson.

Perhaps this was actually a good thing. Wen Ruohan had despaired finding a position for Wen Qionglin in the upcoming period, needing him to be distinguished given his position but not in enough danger to distract Wen Qing. Finding him something to do with children in the safety of the palace would suit both needs.

"S-Sect Lead-" the boy started to stammer out, but Wen Ruohan silenced him with a raised eyebrow.

"If Wei Wuxian states you have talent, you have talent."

Wen Qionglin glanced again at his little cheering section, Wei Wuxian smiling at the front of it, and his eyes changed in a heartbeat, looking more determined than Wen Ruohan thought he had ever seen them. With that he moved to the starting point, took another deep breath, and drew his bow. His stance was firm, sure, more perfect than many more senior disciples that Wen Ruohan had trained personally.

"Begin!" He ordered, and Wen Qionglin shot forward. The boy was not as light on his feet as Wei Wuxian, his foot work not as perfect, in fact he moved more like a common bare handed fighting specialist than a cultivator of his rank, but he made exceptional time.

He also hit the bullseye, or edge of the bullseye, on every single target.

All the little disciples cheered, throwing their hands up and rushing Wen Qing's younger brother as soon as he crossed the finish line, but Wei Wuxian beat all of them, letting out a loud laugh and practically running the other teen over in his exuberant celebratory backslap that looked more like a combination of tackle and hug.

Well... shit.

XxXxX

Wei Wuxian managed to remain composed as he left the Nightless City at the end of his latest visit.

He stayed calm all the way to Yiling.

And then promptly threw up by the roadside as soon as he touched down.

It hadn't entirely hit him until the night after the confrontation on the training grounds what he had done. He'd been so excited for Wen Ning to finally get the recognition that he deserved, for the adorable little disciples to not have their growth hindered, that he had basically forgotten which sect he was helping.

The family dinner that evening had been canceled as Wen Chao had been locked in his rooms while every trainer, teacher, advisor, and senior disciple that had anything to do with educating disciples had been dragged to Wen Ruohan's office. Despite Wen Xu's attempts to distract him, Wei Wuxian was certain he'd heard screams coming from within.

Wen Ruohan, Wen Xu, and Wen Qing had then been too busy to do anything with him, leaving him and Wen Ning to their own devices in the increasingly tense palace, which for better or worse, involved shepherding around not just the children that Wei Wuxian usually taught, but a bunch of other little Wens too.

They'd spent their time devising as many educational games and distractions as they could, trying to keep up with all of them, with a couple of servants helping corral some of the younger ones and watching over those practicing letters or talismans.

It was disturbingly easy to get all of the kids to cooperate with whatever he thought up, they looked at him like he hung the moon, though initially he hadn't understood why. It was different with Wen Ning. Wen Ning was Wen Ning. It was hard not to adore him.

He'd managed to get bits and pieces from the kids as the week went on, and it appeared that exaggerated versions of his confrontation with Wen Chao had already spread like wildfire, and a grand total of nearly everyone fell on Wei Wuxian's side. Apparently a bunch of the older disciples were thrilled at not having to hold back anymore, while others just spoke carefully worded phrases that hinted just how much they'd disliked the Second Young Master.

The servants, well, none of them commented anything, but they didn't look like they disagreed with any of those carefully worded statements..

They, and the few others over the age of ten that Wei Wuxian had run into, seemed on tenterhooks, waiting to see what the rest of the fallout would be, torn between excitement and fear.

The only real consensus they had all seemed to reach was the one that Wei Wuxian was great.

Wei Wuxian had received nothing but praise for the rest of his visit, especially during the large banquet that was held for Wen Xu's birthday. Wen Ruohan's oldest had announced quite loudly that his gift, a template for a modified cooling talisman, was appreciated but nothing in comparison to the gift he had already given by helping improve their training a thousand-fold.

He didn't think that there was a single person at the event that hadn't thanked him or congratulated him, and no one seemed to care that Wen Chao was missing.

Wei Wuxian had smiled as much as he could, falling back to the courtesies and standard replies that Madam Yu had whipped into him in the months after his arrival to Lotus Pier. It was all he could do given that the only thing he could see in his mind was his shidis in place of the practice dummies, the uncountable number destroyed as they were, "recalled for further review".

The Wen sect, despite what Wen Ruohan told him that first day, were making moves towards other sects. Everyone Wei Wuxian had ever met agreed on the subject, even if no one was really willing to say it. It was the unspoken fact behind the increase in night hunts caused by the spreading, untamed resentful energy leaching from Wen territory into their own, the way the refugees would beg them for help, the disappearances of many rogue cultivators, the harassment of smaller sects, and the fact that Nie Huaisang's brother was a good 40 years younger than any of the other Sect Leaders.

It was the way that any time a disciple from another sect ran across a Wen, they bowed out from the conversation, giving way even when they should not.

If what Wei Wuxian had done allowed the Wen to increase the damage that they were already causing the other sects...

Wei Wuxian didn't really believe in gods, or deities. Still as soon as he made it behind the outcropping that he used to change and stash the piles of presents Wen Ruohan, and now Wen Xu liked to ply him with, he fell to his knees and bowed to the heavens.

Please, please don't let his actions have caused any harm to anyone.

Please.

XxXxX

Jiang Yanli carefully peeled lotus seeds as she watched the pot of soup boiling on the stove.

A-Xian deserved a treat once he was done on the training grounds. She worried that it would be a bit heavy for his stomach since he hadn't been able to eat before mother started to rip



into him, so she also had a melon cooling in the river and ginger tea ready to be brewed.

Luckily, after several pointed messages from the Chief Cultivator, Father had put his foot down on the punishments Mother was allowed to use on A-Xian. She could not punish him with whipping again, no matter how much she wanted to. Especially this time, as rumors from the Nightless City spread like wildfire about how he had humiliated the Second Young Master Wen and insulted the Wen training methods, showing them all up before A-Xian even arrived home.

Mother had been furious, but Father had for once held firm in the face of her rage.

Wei Wuxian still left the Nightless City as planned. There had been no other word from Wen Ruohan. He did not want to risk infuriating the chief cultivator more.

Normally Father was like many other powerful men, leaving most of the child rearing to his wife, and for some reason Jiang Yanli chose not to look at too closely, was especially hands-off for A-Xian. It was something Jiang Yanli herself had been taught to expect in her own marriage. She'd need to know how to manage a household well, defend it when her husband was away, raise his children in the manner of his sect, and be prepared to adapt to whatever new duties she would be tasked with in running the sect's household.

Father was in some ways too kind a person, and one of the duties Mother managed regularly were the punishments of the junior disciples, and any senior disciples that caused issues while in Lotus Pier itself.

Mother had always been harder on A-Xian than she was on any of the others. He would be whipped regularly for infractions that others would get lines or extra drills for, be worked until he dropped at her whim.

Father had stood back as she did so.

Perhaps he did not want to show A-Xian more favor than he already did.

Perhaps he thought it was not his place to step into the way Mother handled things, especially as A-Xian never complained.

Perhaps he loved Mother enough to allow her this way to vent her frustrations this way, out of guilt for the rumors about himself and Wei Wuxian's mother.

Jiang Yanli didn't know, nor did she care.

For all Mother saw A-Xian as an uppity servant, too close to her husband and children, too indulged by her husband to know his place, Jiang Yanli saw him as her brother just as much as A-Cheng is.

Not that Mother treated A-Cheng much better than A-Xian, though it was different.

Mother was strict on her son, and she was right to be. A-Cheng would one day lead the Yunmeng Jiang. He needed to work hard. But Mother forgot to balance that strictness with recognition, especially when she compared A-Cheng to A-Xian.

A-Cheng was incredible. He was wonderful. He put in countless hours of work to get where he was. He was ranked as highly as he was for a reason.

It was not his fault that A-Xian was a genius when it came to cultivation, and that if A-Xian really tried, no one could hold a candle to him. Instead he had to battle with Mother's expectations, and knowing that while A-Xian didn't hold back, he certainly didn't try his hardest, and A-Cheng couldn't stack up to that.

There was a reason Father had named A-Xian First disciple, after all. A-Cheng was amazing, but Wei Wuxian was a step above that. That type of cultivation deserved recognition before it could be lost to another sect.

If A-Xian....

If A-Xian had been part of any other sect, he surely would have been adopted by now.

Likely celebrated to the stars.

Jiang Yanli set aside the now full bowl of peeled lotus seeds, and pulled over the bushel of fresh chillies that the servants had just bought for her. She carefully started slicing them, nodding to the cook who set the oil to heat up, getting ready to make a batch of chili oil.

She could not speak against Mother, especially if Father chose not to. All she could do was sit and prepare to care for A-Xian and A-Cheng.

## Chapter End Notes

~~Sooooo so not beta read. Due to some IRL stuff, even though I had this chapter almost ready I didn't get to spend as much time finishing/editing it as I would have liked, but I wanted to get it out along with the first chapter edits. Chapter is now edited.~~

It also got a bit more tense than I thought? I promise the next chapter has some fluff to make up for it. :)

# Chapter Four

## Chapter Notes

Hi all, I am so sorry for the wait! It had good reasons though, cause life is life. See end notes for my mini-rant on things, or just skip, lol. :)

Edited:

Posting the edits thanks to the amazing [Nonvocal Seagull \(FluffyTheTerrible\)](#)!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Wen Ruohan read through his spymaster's report of Wei Wuxian's return to Lotus Pier. It was finally up to a standard he would consider marginally acceptable, as it contained enough detail for him to be able to safely gauge his grandson's health. He felt pleased to know he had perfectly predicted the reactions of the Jiang. In a way that Wen Ruohan would admit to no one else, it reassured him in his own skills given the heavy blow he had been dealt by the disaster within his own sect.

He'd experienced a jarring shift in his fundamental understanding of the world the moment he saw Wen Qionglin hit so many targets in defiance of his own expectations.

Something that so horrifically jarred his understanding of his sect's skills, of his family, had shaken him in a way he thought was behind him.

That he had his own son to blame for it caused a rage to build in him that for the first time in their lives caused Wen Ruohan to have one of his children thrashed with a discipline whip. The months, if not years it would take Wen Chao to recover would see him confined to his quarters, barely better than a commoner. A single, old male servant would be the only one allowed in or out.

Really the confinement was for Wen Chao's own safety, given the fury eating away at Wen Ruohan.

He had known that the Qishan Wen were better than any other sect, not just due to his presence and that of his direct bloodline, but in their wealth, the number of his disciples, the quality of their cultivation, and the sheer power that they wield.

There was a reason he had been moving to declare their rightful place at the top.

No other power came near him.

Still... still he had the grace to admit that when it came to turning out particularly gifted individual cultivators, the other sects did well.

Oh, Wen Ruohan had a good eye for talent and made up for what his sect lacked by bringing those with exceptional skills in, adopting them into branch families in some exceptional cases as with Wen Zhuliu. But they were all brought in as senior disciples, far past the age to compete in the events at most cultivation gatherings.

He'd had to bite his tongue at the gloating looks of those idiots that thought themselves his peers each time their damn brats had placed above his on the leaderboards, and content himself with the fact that they did not dare speak of it so bluntly, and if he chose so he could wipe their sects from the map. To think if the leashes he'd placed on his youngest had been tighter, he would not have needed to endure that humiliation...

The mere thought of those fools' poorly hidden smirks brought forth the desire to add another lash to Wen Chao's back.

No. That his people exceeded his expectations in so many regards could only be a positive in the end.

All the work he put into his plans could still be worth something.

He'd just need to take a step back and readjust his approach.

Just as he would need to do to handle Wei Wuxian, he thought after he carefully filed the report on his grandson into the correct place. As if he didn't have enough reason to punish Wen Chao, he'd been so busy dealing with the mess the idiot caused with his fragile ego that Wen Ruohan hadn't been able to spend any time with Wei Wuxian for the remainder of his visit. From everyone's accounts Wei Wuxian had been apparently no less engaged, bright, and cheerful with everyone that he interacted with.

Wen Ruohan had only needed to glance at him once from the window to see how false those sentiments rang.

Not even the accolades Xu-er gave him for his assistance in ferreting out Wen Chao's suppression that everyone with half a brain had echoed could bring a real smile on his face.

Perhaps he could handle both the issue of gauging his disciples skills and reassuring Wei Wuxian together? He grabbed an ink brush, jotting down a few notes.

Firstly he needed to gain a better understanding of how his disciples actually fared against those from other sects. That would allow him to more carefully plan the diplomatic interactions with both Lotus Pier and Cloud Recesses, followed by the more decisive moves with the other sects.

Wen Ruohan eyed the table to the side of his office, currently laden with maps and plans that had been rewritten so many times the pages were more black from ink than white.

He would not make the same mistake that he held his spymasters accountable for.

He would not settle for the bare minimum information before he moved.

The current situation was not untenable. His forces might be a bit spread thin from monitoring their present territory and from the retraining, but the rumors currently circulating about the actions he had already taken with the surrounding smaller sects would likely grow and twist in beneficial ways to cause further cautiousness in the larger sects.

He could even use the various night hunts that concerned his grandson as an excuse to keep their new outposts in place and as reason for their build up in force. It could also justify additional movement of supplies and retrenching.

Yes, Wen Ruohan could maintain the current status quo for several years yet. Given the wildly inconsistent results that had come from his initial reassessments, it would give him time to better review his own disciples and re-train them where needed, and the increased night hunts would be useful as further training and put Wei Wuxian at ease.

It was a win win.

He'll also need to arrange a few more 'friendly' competitions to see how they stack up after.

Perhaps the sight of such sudden and distinct improvements in his already overwhelming forces would do well to quell any mistaken thoughts that people could stand against him, especially amongst the Jiang and the Lan.

Yes. The only rational result was for Wen Ruohan to push back his plans by a few years. The choice would not cost him anything that he could not afford to pay a hundred times over.

The delay would also allow Wuxian more time to come to know him, and truly see the right side on his own.

He'll just have to spend more time with the boy, including outside the Nightless City. Not only does his grandson need to be shown his place in relation to others, he would need to be reassured that Wen Ruohan would not treat him differently in front of the other sects.

Wen Ruohan getting to show off his incomparable grandson was a brilliant bonus.

Hmm, he vaguely recalled an invitation to the birthday celebration of Jin Guangshan's brat. That would do for a first outing. He'd have Wei Wuxian join him, Xu-er, and Wen Qing for it. He'd be able to gauge in person Wei Wuxian's feelings towards Jiang Yanli's former suitor so he could plan how to move forward on that front, then spend a pleasant evening drowning out the continual thrum of his annoyance at Wen Chao with the Jin's excellent wine.

XxXxX

Wen Ruohan had lost track of Wei Wuxian, which should have been difficult given the attention the boy drew just by breathing. Wei Wuxian's dark black and red clothes was a stark contrast to the rest of the festive and gold colors of the overly ostentatious celebration that the picture he presented seemed as eye catching, if opposite, as an emergency flare on the night of a new moon.

He looked to Xu-er, who had recently been seen with the boy, and his oldest son tilted his head towards the hallway leading to the entrance. Hmm, so Wei Wuxian had taken a break.

While Wen Ruohan could not easily admit to being mistaken in his calculations, he could state that perhaps his grandson did not quite feel as comfortable with being pushed front and center by his side as he'd thought.

Wei Wuxian certainly did thrive on company as he thought, and was as gregarious as he was charming. He had most of the women he talked to giggling playfully, and was good at gently teasing and disarming most of the men. Still it seemed that when he naturally drew attention to himself it was easier for him than when Wen Ruohan had had him at his left hand, complimenting him as he deserved and drawing the appropriate fawning of the masses around them.

His grandson was absolutely perfect and even more absolutely deserved to steal the spotlight from Jin Guangshan's failure of a brat the way he had, even at the haughty twit's birthday celebration.

He hid a grin in his wine cup, no wonder Wei Wuxian called the Jin heir a peacock. Wen Ruohan had laughed at the comparison, though that did not in any way stop Wei Wuxian's adorable, flustered blushing and profuse apologies for letting the phrase slip out after being informed of their destination. The Jin brat certainly did look all ruffled and attempting to puff up and appear bigger and better than he actually is in his shiny gold robes, just like a male peacock putting on a display.

Wen Ruohan finished his glass of wine and moved to follow his grandson. It would do little harm to take a break from the many effusive congratulations and well wishes paid to the floundering heir. With his purposeful stride, the idiots that would normally fawn over him scattered, leaving him a clear path.

He hadn't even made it halfway through the superfluous hall that forced guests past displays of trumped up Jin victories on the way to the banquet hall situated at the rear of Koi Tower rather than in the front like all the sanely designed castles, when Jin Guangshan entered from the opposite end, an odd sort of half-scowl on his face.

Quite a few servants were scurrying in the man's wake, tired resignation settling on their faces after cycling through a host of fearful emotions.

Wen Ruohan felt little surprise at the show of poor training. The Jin had few life-long servants, and fewer still that had been selected for something other than looks, or lack of looks, if Madam Jin was in a particularly vicious mood towards her husband. Still, Madam Jin was known to run a relatively tight household, and their composure should be better than this.

Predictably, the man immediately brightened the moment he spotted Wen Ruohan despite the otherwise negative atmosphere of his trailing entourage. He hurried up to him, the smell of alcohol so strong it stung his nose. "Oh, Sect Leader Wen! My apologies for stepping out for a moment! How are you enjoying the evening so far?"

"The wine is as delightful as always," he stated, not willing to concede anything else. "What inconvenience could take such a gracious host from his guests?"

For someone that liked to call himself a master of people, the man utterly failed to pick up on the sarcasm that touched Wen Ruohan's words. Whether it was on purpose or not, he couldn't quite decide. "Just a small matter, I assure you! Some riffraff that could have caused my wife a minor discomfort on such an auspicious day!"

There was only one type of 'riffraff' that would ever even foolishly dream of a warm welcome at Koi Tower. "Hmm, then it is a good thing you took care of it. Family is the most important thing after all."

Jin Guangshan did not grimace at his reply, but it was close. Sure enough one of the man's many bastards had come, and unfortunately picked a worse day than usual for it. And to give the man some credit, he did try to recover quickly. "Ahhh, wise words as always Sect Leader Wen!" The man stated with a forced joviality that paled in comparison to Wei Wuxian's, the waste of gold unable to stop the narrowing of his eyes, and Wen Ruohan wondered what the man could possibly try to respond with. If he knew the man, and he did, it would most likely be either Wen Chao's absence, or Wei Wuxian's presence.

He was quite predictable in his tit for tat, after all. The man favored sycophants so highly that there was hardly an original thought in his head or his court's, and the few they did have were all about how to take advantage of people to make more money, or some new debauchery to try with an unsuspecting whore.

When he finally got around to bringing the Jins more under his control than they already were, he'll need to cherry pick some of their best people to add to his own treasury staff. His resources were considerable, but if he was going to spoil his grandchildren as much as he wanted, it wouldn't hurt to grow his wealth further. The fools would be easy to control with their vices, and he did not anticipate that the few good minds among the lot would have difficulties puppeting what was left of the Koi Tower gentry from the Nightless City until a sufficient new supervisor for the region could be found.

"Speaking of family, should we expect to celebrate a certain addition to yours soon? Though I admire your ability! To be able to acquire someone placed so highly in another sect's clan and adopt them into your branch families speaks highly of your sect."

"Talent deserves to be recognized and brought into the family best suited to them." The fact that Jin Guangshan took Wen Ruohan's answering bearing of teeth as a smile and laughed was, well, perhaps it would be amusing later, to find one of the man's bastards with half a brain and adopt them into the same branch as Wen Zhuliu to act as a liaison between their clans and lead his newly expanded treasury team.

"Not to speak ill of friends, given the closeness of my Lady wife to Jiang Fengmian's madam, but I do think that untamed boy would do well under your guidance."

Perhaps make them head of the supervisory office even.

"Oh?" Anyone with any ounce of intelligence would quickly pick up the warning in his tone, and for all he was not as adept at manipulation as he imagined, Jin Guangshan was normally intelligent enough to pick up on a threat to himself and rarely pushed his luck with Wen Ruohan.

Whether it was the wine, the 'riffraff' he had just dealt with, or something else, the man did not pick up on his tone today.

"Yes, the servant is shameless, you know? No sense of his place! Probably because Jiang Fengmian, for all his virtues, is not as strict as he should be. I suppose it's only inevitable when he was so in love with his mother, not that I can blame him! Changse Sanren was a beautiful thing, though she was certainly as lacking in brains as her son since she ran off with a servant." He waved his hand in the air, even as Wen Ruohan's hands settled behind his back, his right hand grasping his left wrist tightly enough the small studs he had added to his own bracers to match Wei Wuxian's pierced his flesh. "Bah! Even Lan Qiren couldn't rein him in at Cloud Recesses! That son of a servant dared to assault my heir while he was there for classes for no good reason and ruined a perfectly good engagement! And does Jiang Fengmian punish him? Not at all! Says being removed from classes is enough!"

He wondered how all the gold in Koi Tower would look lit by fire.

"Wild ones like that need a firm hand, ah Sect Leader Wen?"

He imagined it would be a pale imitation of the volcano at home, but maybe if they strategically placed fire talismans, perhaps with some fireworks, it would make a good celebratory show for one of grandson's birthdays? Especially if he pinned Jin Guangshan's brat in the center with his own sword.

"Why it's obvious he has no care for his standing with how he behaved at the conference, and even tonight he acts like he is an actual Jiang! Making demands and not recognizing how lucky he is to have your gracious interest and how to act around his betters lest he lose that consideration! And him daring to argue with me on the steps of my home just shows even more the failures of his breeding for all your kindness in bringing him here!"

Or maybe make him light the fire himself while his parents were covered with pitch.

Hmm, but first to find Wei Wuxian and figure out more of what had transpired.

His grandson had bowed perfectly politely to his host when he was at Wen Ruohan's side, if not deeper than someone of his rank should, and had definitely not spoken out of turn or demanded anything in the banquet hall, which meant that Jin Guangshan had encountered Wei Wuxian since he'd left the hall.

"As pleasant as this conversation has been, Sect Leader Jin, I would hate to keep you from your other guests, and it seems I need to speak to Wei Wuxian."

Before the dead man could say anything else, Wen Ruohan stalked past him, heading for the front.



He ignored the incompetent whoremonger calling after him, quickly moving to where the man had come from.

One of the servants near the entrance who overheard the conversation from a distance subtly drew his attention and, after a furtive glance at where the walking pile of tinder behind him, tilted his head slightly in the direction of the ostentatious staircase to Koi Tower.

Wen Ruohan noted the man's features, marking him as a possible candidate to promote once he decided what would replace the tacky piece of overcompensation the Jin called a home.

Wei Wuxian was not visible in the greeting area at the top of the stairs, but it didn't take him long to find the boy kneeling at the base, frantically checking over a disheveled young man dressed in worn but relatively well made clothes who was curled up in pain. It didn't take a genius to realize what had happened to the bastard that had the misfortune to show up on the day of the peacock's birthday celebration.

He sauntered down, taking in further details of the bastard his grandson was frantically worrying over to the point of feeding him spiritual energy to help heal him, as much as it would help someone who lacked a powerful core. After all, if he had a powerful core, he wouldn't have been kicked down the steps, even if he had been sent away.

He had obviously had some money, though not a large amount, and not for a while given the patches in the clothes at closer inspection.

But aside from the mess from his tumble, he appeared fairly well put together, though his hat was far more stiff than any cultivator would wear, more like something for those that try to style themselves after the idiots that thought they were noble despite their lack of cores.

He was quite obviously trying too hard to seem like a perfectly put together young master.

Hmm, perhaps Wei Wuxian sympathized with the boy's plight given his own history.

Well, he'd been thinking of using one of the fool's bastards. How thoughtful of his grandson to have found one for him already.

"His spiritual energy doesn't seem powerful enough that what you're giving him will help. Have him looked at by a healer." He told Wei Wuxian, who smiled up at him, fairly obviously unsurprised even though the bastard jumped half a foot and scrambled into a bow in spite of Wei Wuxian's insistence that he be careful. It was so refreshing to have someone around him good enough to sense him, and bright enough to prioritize correctly.

The bastard practically shook as he stayed bowing, though he was quite obviously making strides, and good ones at that, to compose himself. "This humble one thanks both Masters for their concern, but will be unable to afford a healer, and will--"

"Forget that! I'll pay for it! It's not your fault Jin Guangshan lacks manners!" Wei Wuxian puffed up indignantly. Wen Ruohan was well aware that despite being First Disciple, he was not given nearly enough funds from the Jiang. From what his spies explained, Jiang Yanli was the one who saw to most of his clothes from her personal expenses, which was the only

reason they were as nice as they were. Wei Wuxian had not received the stipend that would be expected when he gained his position, and remained in the rooms that were meant for a personal servant. It also took his spies a while to find out what he did with his money, which was to pay for enough food and treats to spoil all the street rats he ran across, his shidi, and the Jiang siblings. He spent so much that the vendors were happy to give him the occasional free sample for himself, especially when he was so kind and flattering to them. "And do you have somewhere to stay and recover after? You need soup to feel better! I bet there is somewhere around here we can get soup!"

"This one is honored but finds the gesture unnecessary, as he will be fine on his own," the bastard insisted.

Wei Wuxian somehow puffed up even more. Wen Ruohan thought it was absolutely adorable. "No way! You should come with me! I'll figure out something with Uncle Jiang even if Madam Yu gets cranky about it!"

"This one wishes for no more trou-"

"It's not trouble! And even if she does get cranky don't worry, she'd take it out on me, not you!" Wei Wuxian stated, and that was where Wen Ruohan drew the line.

"He'll come with us," Wen Ruohan headed him off. "I am sure there is something the young man can do at the Nightless City. Our healers will look after him as well."

Wei Wuxian blinked, and Wen Ruohan sighed as he realized the boy hadn't even realized that was an option even with the clan leader standing right there. Perhaps he should hand over Wei Wuxian's accounts earlier than planned? Wen Ruohan needed something to reassure Wei Wuxian that the Nightless City was his home. He sighed, even if it means letting him provide homes for street rats and any other poor souls that he took pity on, which includes gobsmacked bastards. Though in this case the bastard might have long term returns outside of making his grandson happy, given that he could probably be used in handling the Jin after he killed the fool and his only legitimate spawn.

As he quickly processed what Wen Ruohan had said, Wei Wuxian rivaled the sun as he gave a quick bow in gratitude. "Thank you, Sect Leader Wen!" The bastard made a choking sound. "Ahh, I almost forgot, this is Sect Leader Wen! Sect Leader Wen this is-" Wei Wuxian blinked again, then paused, and turned to the other boy giving him a short bow. "This one apologizes, he forgot to ask your name!"

"Me-Meng Yao, honored Young Master."

"Please no! That makes me sound like someone like the Peacock! Just call me Wei Wuxian! And Sect Leader Wen, this is Meng Yao!"

Wen Ruohan couldn't help a laugh at his grandson's antics.

"Honored to be at your service," Meng Yao bowed deeply.

Good, he had a brain.

"Wei Wuxian, go collect Xu-er and the rest, we're leaving."

"Yes sir!" Wei Wuxian gave a jaunty bow then leapt half the stairs at once.

Wen Ruohan glanced down at Meng Yao, who was doing a remarkable job of not flailing like an idiot despite the shock on his face. Hmm, it was promising. He'd composed himself quite quickly earlier as well.

"You will be coming with us to the Nightless City, and I am sure you will make yourself as useful as possible given Wei Wuxian recommended you."

Meng Yao bowed again.

XxXxX

"Meng Yao."

He looked up from the storage inventory he was using his lunch to audit to help an overworked senior who had an uncle in the treasury department, only to scramble to his feet and bow his head to Qian Heng. Wen Ruohan's head servant was strict, efficient, composed, and surprisingly fair, Meng Yao had quickly figured out that the best way to get on his good side was not to flatter or praise, but to just do your duties competently and not make his job any harder. Meng Yao liked to think that even though he had caused a fuss, given the way he had been brought into Wen Ruohan's service, he had made himself useful as they rotated him through departments to find his best fit.

"He-"

"Attend," the head servant interrupted in his usual brisk manner, and turned on his heel to move off.

Meng Yao ignored his food, but glanced at the inventory books which were technically not something he could just leave unattended, not sure what to do, when Deng Changming, Wei Wuxian's not-quite personal servant, quickly started closing them up for him. "I will get these back to Wen Xiang, go!"

Meng Yao nodded gratefully, scurrying to catch up to Qian Heng as gracefully as he could given that the man had not slowed at all.

He did not even attempt to make small talk as he followed the man, dreadfully unsure what was going on. Had he committed some gaff?

He thought he had quickly gathered the personalities of all the key players in Wen Ruohan's household and avoided causing offense, which was oddly easy despite the odd, nebulous standing of the young master that caused Meng Yao to be brought in.

No one was quite sure what to make of Wei Wuxian. He was gregarious, kind, and bright. He was frank with the servants, not laying traps nor finding fault in every little thing. He was the son of a servant (or first disciple? Meng Yao had not been granted access to the lineage books yet, and was thus unsure) from a different sect, but was still someone that Sect Leader Wen

showed particular favor to, to the point that he even reigned in and even punished his second son for the various cruelties that he inflicted on everyone around him. It had been something no one had held out any hope for, as Wen Ruohan, for all that he was a good leader, didn't particularly notice if servants or cultivators that weren't his favorites ran afoul of his sons and perished for often times stupid reasons.

Qian Heng stopped before an elaborate door with two guards before it. If Meng Yao wasn't mistaken, this was the Sect Leader's office.

One of the guards nodded, and announced their entry.

A secretary from inside the office quickly and quietly opened the door. Qian Heng quickly walked down the small hallway leading to the main office, before pausing in front of the office for Wen Ruohan to summon them before turning the corner and entering the office proper, with Meng Yao tight on his heels.

Remembering the etiquette overview he had received from Deng Changming on his first night, he bowed low, showing the utmost deference.

"Well?" The familiar voice from that day at Koi Tower asked.

"Sect Leader Wen, it is this servant's humble opinion that Meng Yao is wasted in his current position." Meng Yao couldn't help but look up at Qian Heng in shock, before he quickly remembered himself and lowered his head to the floor once more. "While his understanding of cultivation is tarnished by his age and the trash common peddle to those outside the sects, he is well read and knowledgeable on many matters. If this servant did not already have an apprentice, Meng Yao would be recommended for the position."

Meng Yao wasn't quite sure what to say, and thus did the wise thing and kept his mouth shut.

Sect Leader Wen made a curious hum, and he heard the man stand from his desk, the quiet swish of robes and the nearly soundless footfall of well-made boots as he moved around the desk and walked a circle around his kneeling form.

"What adds to a man?"

Meng Yao blinked. "Sec-"

"Answer."

Meng Yao wracked his brain and then flashed to an old proverb. "Virtues."

"When is wealth truly useful?"

"When it is spread about."

"What should happen to those who do evil?"

Meng Yao quickly answered the next question, and the next. The interrogation lasted for what felt like hours, and Meng Yao only prayed that he did not fail horribly for whatever

opportunity Wen Ruohan was testing him for.

Finally, when his throat was sore and felt like rocks, the questioning stopped.

“Get to your feet.”

Meng Yao froze. According to just about everyone, Wen Ruohan allowed very few people to stay on their feet in his presence. Still, not to risk the man’s displeasure, he scrambled to his feet as gracefully as he could. “Wei Wuxian does not cower. As his right hand, neither will you.”

Meng Yao nodded, inclining in a light bow before he realized what the sect leader had said. “Sect Leader Wen?”

“I have been considering who to appoint to his side, and you, while you need work, will fit him.”

“It’s an honor, Sect Leader!”

Wen Ruohan made a tscking sound and moved back to sit at his desk. “Meet my eyes.”

Meng Yao swallowed and did so, though he could not quite be fearless in doing so. Wen Ruohan smirked, and nodded.

“Good.” He waved Qian Heng out, who bowed and quickly left the room. He soundlessly directed Meng Yao to sit in one of the chairs at the side of his desk, even as he called for his secretary to bring tea and then get out of the room. Meng Yao waited nervously as the man efficiently completed his tasks.

Once they were alone, Sect Leader Wen leaned back in his chair and sipped his tea. Meng Yao kept his back ramrod straight as he delicately held the exquisitely carved thin jade tea cup and prayed to not drop it in his nervousness.

“Your main task, as his advisor,” Wen Ruohan stated, looking at Meng Yao intently, “is to make sure that Wei Wuxian’s kindness doesn’t get him into trouble.”

Meng Yao blinked.

To question or not. Well, Sect Leader Wen did say that Wei Wuxian does not cower, and he would rather get it right than not. “With your esteemed regard for him, what kind of trouble could Young Master Wei possibly get into?”

Wen Ruohan smirked, obviously seeing through him. Meng Yao swore to himself to improve his masks so that he would only ever be seen as he intended.

“For all his brilliance and exceptional cultivation, Wei Wuxian is overly compassionate. He cares far too much for things that are below his notice.” Meng Yao wondered if the man thought Meng Yao himself had been below Wei Wuxian’s notice. The way Wen Ruohan looked at him like Meng Yao was a dog made it seem likely. “He does not so much care what

people think of him but only that they are happy, and thanks to the idiots he was raised by does not factor his own safety into working to gain that happiness for others.”

Meng Yao nodded carefully. Wen Ruohan’s gaze intensified and Meng Yao practically choked on the force of qi and spiritual power that filled the room. “Your duty, aside from ensuring that he gets whatever he wants and feels at home here where he belongs, is to help him find a way to direct his kindness and care in a manner that keeps him safe from harm, and protect him from doing something that will lead to his kindness to being taken advantage of.”

The spiritual power intensified once more, punching the air out from Meng Yao’s chest, as Wen Ruohan’s eyes practically glowed.

Meng Yao hastily bowed his head, and the spiritual pressure vanished, he gasped for breath, thinking over what the Sect Leader had said.

Wei Wuxian had not hesitated when he helped Meng Yao. He had faced Sect Leader Jin and mouthed off to him, drawing his attention from Meng Yao. When he had unintentionally drawn his father’s attention again and the man had thrown him down the stairs for it, Wei Wuxian had tried to intervene again, and was pushed down the stairs as well, only he was skilled enough to have done that damn floating trick to sail to the bottom of the staircase unharmed while Meng Yao had taken the hard way down.

Though he had been humiliated, frustrated, and hurt, Meng Yao had in fact been thinking how to use the attention of the young master for his own advantage before Wei Wuxian had beat him to it unhesitatingly. The other offered up his help and consideration, smiling and bright, and kind, so very kind the whole time. He thought of how Wei Wuxian had seemed sure he could get Meng Yao a place at Lotus Pier even if Madam Yu wouldn’t be happy with him for it, and thought of the rumors he had learned of during his arrival at Nightless City of how the Jiangs treated their first disciple.

Since he’d arrived at the Nightless City he had not seen anything different.

Wei Wuxian had mingled easily with the servants, not making their jobs harder, giving clear instructions of the few wants or likes he had, but otherwise just letting them do their jobs. He was grateful for help, always with a thanks and a smile for anyone, no matter their station. He also didn’t hesitate to step in and help if he saw a servant carrying a slightly too heavy load, and actually cleaned up his own messes rather than thoughtlessly expecting servants to pick up after him. His office was apparently a disaster, but they had instructions not to touch that as half of the scattered papers were experiments. Wei Wuxian kept everything untidy contained there, though, not leaving any of said experiments out where a servant could accidentally touch them and become injured.

He was one of the few where the attitude of the servants remained no different behind his back than to his face, even when he traveled back to the Jiang.

Serving him required none of the coached politeness and desperate smiles that were present around Wen Xu when he was in a bad mood, or had been needed in every interaction with Wen Chao before his confinement.

And the children...

The young cultivators and the child servants all loved him.

There was no other word for it.

It was love.

Not just respect, but the way they lit up, laughed, and smiled... There were no children that did not love him.

Yes. Wei Wuxian was one of those rare people that were truly kind, that did not just give lip service to the ideals the cultivation world espoused but instead lived them.

Those types of personalities were easy to manipulate, and they unintentionally drew ire or misunderstandings more often than not. They were the kind that so many treated as too good to be true, and wanted to tear down if they came across one. Especially when it was someone like Wei Wuxian, who was for all intents and purposes, reaching far above his station.

A smart, bright young man willing to get in the middle of things to make others happy even if he himself wasn't as happy.

He would always do the right thing even if it cost him, and it would cost him.

The world ate people like Wei Wuxian up and spit them out broken and bleeding if they were not protected.

He raised his head to meet Wen Ruohan's eyes and bowed. It would be difficult, but Meng Yao knew himself to be up to the task.

"You'll also report to me on his well being, as he often fails to mention things that should be addressed."

It didn't take much to imagine that Wei Wuxian regularly insulted people like he had done to Jin Guangshan when he assisted Meng Yao without telling Sect Leader Wen about it. Additionally, from what he had been able to finagle out of the other servants, Wei Wuxian also hadn't reported Wen Chao's harassment to the Sect Leader, and it had only been a servant acting above her station to bring his attention to the situation that acted as a catalyst to the second son's current house arrest.

Meng Yao, now that he was really thinking about it, carefully reassessed Wei Wuxian in light of all that he had learned.

Huh, Wei Wuxian was far more like Meng Yao himself than anyone else of rank.

"Yes, Sect Leader."

"And lastly, if anyone does not treat him with the respect and adoration he is due, you will give me or Wen Xu their names." Sect Leader Wen's eyes glowed with fury at the thought, and a chill went up Meng Yao's spine.

XxXxX

Wei Wuxian practically skipped when he left Wen Ruohan's side. The man was heading towards his office where Wei Wuxian would join him after he bathed like the man always insisted he did as soon as he arrived.

During his customary pitstop in Yiling on his way there, he had realized that he had been so distracted by Madam Yu's last minute drills that she had him do before he left, he had forgotten to swing by Jiang Yanli's room and grab the boots she had insisted on drying for him after he and Jiang Cheng had accidentally ended up dropping themselves and twenty shidi into the middle of the lake while teaching them to use talismans while flying.

That meant he only had the nicer boots shijie had given him to match his more formal first disciple robes which were already a mess from the last minute drills, and the really too nice boots Wen Ruohan had given him. He burst through the door to his room, certain that Deng Changming would be there like he always was to ensure Wei Wuxian's bath was perfect—which was so unbelievably weird, but at moments like this, incredibly useful. “A-Ming! Is there an-”

Wei Wuxian pulled up short and blinked at the well dressed teen standing in the middle of his main room.

“Young Master Wei,” Meng Yao bowed.

“Meng Yao!” Wei Wuxian beamed. “It's great to see you! How are you liking Nightless City? Everyone is nice to you, right? I'm glad you got the chance to visit me! What do they have you doing? I hope it's something enjoyable, I mean, you'd be good at anything, I can tell, but if you have to do something you may as well do something you enjoy, right?”

Meng Yao smiled so much that his cheeks dimpled and he let out a small laugh, and Wei Wuxian thought that it suited him, not that weird smile he had been trying to force at Koi Tower, and as he tried to make himself useful the first few days he had been here at Nightless City before Wei Wuxian had had to return to Lotus Pier.

That smile was practiced and nearly flawless, but it reminded Wei Wuxian too much of the smile he himself had worn on the streets when he was approaching people, hoping they would help rather than hurt him, and the one he wore around Madam Yu to try to keep the peace so it wouldn't worry everyone.

“This one is glad to see Young Master Wei too, and likes Nightless City just fine.”

“Please just call me Wei Wuxian! Young Master is for Wen Xu and Jiang Cheng and the Peacock and the rest of them,” he grinned.

“If you insist,” Meng Yao grinned, and Wei Wuxian laughed, noting that his phrasing had avoided both addresses. Though he hadn't known him long, he had the feeling that Meng Yao would absolutely find ways to avoid calling him something that was not absolutely proper. He had that kind of air about him that told Wei Wuxian he'd been raised to be unfailingly polite, and just like him, had learned how addressing certain people in certain ways was a



good way to redirect attention. “This one has been assigned by Sect Leader Wen as your assistant.”

“What!?! But isn’t that like a waste? I’m no one important and not even a Wen and you’re awesome and I am only here occasionally! And didn’t A-Ming say he was in charge of my rooms? I mean, it’s not really necessary, as much as I appreciate it. I am a disaster, but I can keep this few rooms clean, but Wen Ruohan insisted and-”

Meng Yao bowed. “You are very important. Not only does Sect Leader Wen value you highly, but you have already made great contributions to the Wen Sect despite spending unfortunately little time here.”

Wei Wuxian flailed just a bit, that actually sounded sincere. “Ahhh! Meng Yao, warn this poor soul before you do that flattery stuff! There’s no need for such insincere fawning between friends, please!”

Meng Yao merely raised an eyebrow before smiling again. Wei Wuxian had the feeling that his words had quickly been noted, reviewed, and promptly dismissed. “Additionally, your abilities are not in question. You are quite capable in anything you put your mind to,” plowing on as Wei Wuxian wailed. “Deng Changming is still in charge of your rooms. In fact, since your last visit, your household has finally been formalized.”

“My what!?!” Wei Wuxian choked.

“I am your assistant, and am happy to do anything you require.”

“You sai-”

“Deng Changming has been assigned as your personal servant as opposed to just being in charge of your rooms, along with Su Meng, Fu Gang, Tang Heng, Guo Ai, and Luo Xiuying.” Wei Wuxian whined. WHY? Why did he need a household? It wasn’t like he would be living in Nightless City! It was such a waste! And much less an aide and six servants! He didn’t need this! Madam Yu would be furious, and he just knew that this was the type of thing that would make Uncle Jiang and Jiang Cheng even more suspicious and up in arms than they already were over this whole weird situation. “Also Ren Xiaoli and Liang Bingwen will be your teaching assistants and manage your students when you are in Lotus Pier.”

“My students!?”

Madam Yu would kill him.

Meng Yao smiled, “Pretend to be surprised when Sect Leader Wen tells you.”

“Why would he trust me with Wen juniors? I am the First Disciple of the Jiang sect!” Wei Wuxian cried.

“Because you’re you,” Meng Yao dimpled again. “Now, Deng Changming has assured your bath is to your standards, and Tang Heng and Guo Ai have prepared your clothes, you’ll need

something slightly nicer for lunch as there is a banquet tomorrow celebrating the new educational model that Sect Leader Wen is instating, and there will be many high ranking officials present.”

Wei Wuxian whined.

“Lady Wen Qing and Young Master Wen Qionglin are among them, though Young Master Wen Xu will not arrive back until tomorrow.”

That wouldn’t be too bad.

“Also, Sect Leader Wen has instructed that you be made aware of all the important dates for the family and insists that you be here for them even if they do not coincide with your scheduled visits.”

Wei Wuxian took a deep breath. Ugh, Madam Yu really was going to kill him. “When is the next one?”

“Wen Qing’s birthday celebration is eight days after you are scheduled to leave.”

Wei Wuxian keened his distress out loud and turned on his heel to hide in the bath.

“This one will leave so you can bathe in peace. Please don’t take too long, Guo Ai will need to do your hair, as Sect Leader Wen has gifted you a new guan.”

Maybe he could drown himself in the bath...

XxXxX

“How about a new bag to hold her medicines?” Jiang Yanli asked, idly popping out a few of the lotus seeds from the pods that the boys had collected as they rode their kind-of-but-not-actually clandestinely acquired boat to the middle of their favorite out of the way lake. The boat was meant for harvesting, completely emptied out and even the benches removed for more storage space, though given that this particular lake was one of the ones with only a few muddy areas near the shore that lotuses thrived in and was otherwise nice enough to swim in, it would probably not take many trips to clear.

The lotus farmers that had been working this lake had taken one look at the three of them hovering, trying to be unobtrusive when they found their planned spot occupied and laughingly told them to just take the boat rather than have Wei Wuxian come up with whatever crazy idea to borrow a boat.

They had then left to help at one of the other lakes for the day, leaving the three blissfully on their own for their escape.

Wei Wuxian had given Father the not-entirely-an-excuse of needing help picking out a suitable gift for Wen Qing’s upcoming birthday to get them some free time from Mother’s increased training regime. Father had quickly handed them a money pouch and waved them off, and they bolted for the gates before anyone could hold them up long enough for Mother to catch them.

"That might work, but she's so particular about her supplies! What if I get her the wrong type of bag?"

"I am sure the shop owners would have good recommendations."

"Tsk, I say you should get her a comb!"

"It would be a good idea if A-Xian would like to court her, A-Cheng," she smiled.

"No way! She is scary and Xianxian is three years old!" A-Xian practically shrieked while Jiang Cheng spluttered then made fake gagging sounds. She deliberately did not notice Jiang Cheng's half wistful and half jealous look before he started pretending to choke.

She had known Jiang Cheng had had a small crush on Wen Qing back at Cloud Recesses, but he would still curse all Wens and had made no other mention of her once he'd returned, although there were moments where he would sigh, or drift off had quickly passed.

It was good to get confirmation that he still thought of her. Perhaps A-Xian would be able to help her nudge them together to see if they suited each other further?

While the Wens were a definite threat, she was sure something could be arranged if A-Cheng truly loved Wen Qing. Especially as aside from looks and family pedigree, Wen Qing was the opposite of her brother's lengthy list to the matchmaker, which made her perfect and exactly what A-Cheng needed.

As much as he thought he wanted the opposite of their mother, the personality from his list would be too close to Father, and A-Cheng had Mother's temper. Wei Wuxian had many duties as First Disciple, and they would only increase as Jiang Cheng started to take over more of his own duties. And even when he didn't have duties...

Well, A-Xian was brilliant at smoothing ruffled feathers when not deliberately ruffling them to draw attention in the direction he wanted it to go, but he did it by being self-deprecating and taking on the blame. And A-Cheng, so well trained by Mother, would let him. And Jiang Yanli would marry out eventually. There were too few women of her status in their generation for her not to. Even if it wasn't Jin Zixuan like she had always dreamed of, and wanted more than a little, it would happen eventually.

She'd be unable to help A-Xian with his hurts, or Jiang Cheng with the small gestures that made up his apologies since he was too much of Mother's son to use words.

They needed someone who could not just soothe the cuts caused by their sharp edges, but could help her brothers file them down and fix the causes more than Jiang Yanli could herself. Jiang Cheng needed someone who would stand up to him, stand up to Mother with the backing of her maternal sect to make it stick. He needed someone that challenged him to be better, not roll over and show their belly and cower the way they all did before Madam Yu. As had been made readily apparent, though Father was the only person in their clan that could rein Mother in, he would not do so unless forced to as had occurred with Wen Ruohan and A-Xian. Whether it was love or guilt that resulted in the absolutely freehand Father gave Mother, she did not particularly care.

Though Jiang Yanli knew it to be quite unkind to her future sister-in-law to place her in such a predicament, especially given that A-Cheng would likely waffle between supporting his wife and being filial to Mother, she would see her brothers cared and fought for when she could not be at their sides in person as she is in spirit.

Who knows, if her sister-in-law could be as tough and as bright as Wen Qing, she might be able to help A-Cheng develop some confidence and help A-Xian understand that sometimes solutions to problems do not involve him thanklessly shouldering the brunt of Mother's anger.

Ah that reminded her, she needed to have A-Cheng put twelfth shidi through his paces first thing in the morning. He had failed to properly store the training swords even though he had known Mother was leading the next class and that she would inspect the equipment beforehand as a point to the disciples. A-Xian had drawn Mother's ire from the cowering boy, which would have been fine if the boy thanked A-Xian after, but he didn't.

A-Xian had been so exhausted after his hands shook when he was idly jotting down notes for one of his talisman ideas later that night while he watched the sunset with her.

"Perhaps you could make something clever for her? Perhaps a talisman to wash her hands before surgery or to clean her needles?"

"Wouldn't that be too close to what I got Wen Xu though?" A-Xian hummed as he peeled one of the lotus seeds and tossed it to A-Cheng who caught it in his mouth, who then returned the favor.

"Not at all! The design would be unique and if you made the template on pretty paper with your best calligraphy she could hang it on a wall after!"

"It would be useful," A-Cheng agreed. "And since you definitely aren't courting her cousin, it wouldn't give the impression that you're courting her."

"It's settled then!" A-Xian grinned brightly as he pulled a brush, ink set, and paper seemingly out of nowhere with a wild flourish. "A talisman to wash hands seems like a good idea, but too close to a normal water or cleansing talisman. I want to do something that'll make her gape! What's a problem we can solve for her?"

"We?" Hissed A-Cheng as he settled in to peeling the rest of the lotus seeds while Jiang Yanli finished de-seeding the last few stalks, piling all but a few of the perfectly ripe green stems neatly at the far end of the boat so the farmers could sell them later. She quickly bundled her small batch to take home to make her lotus and pork rib soup for the boys later today.

While they had left too quickly for her servants to follow, such few things would not get in the way if all they were shopping for was nice talisman paper and ink. They could also stop by an herbalist and get something to complement A-Xian's talisman gift from her and A-Cheng for supporting A-Xian.

"Perhaps a way to numb pain?"

"Tie idiot flight risks like you to a bed," A-Cheng snapped.

"Hey!" Wei Wuxian cried as Jiang Yanli laughed and A-Cheng allowed a small smile through. A-Xian dramatically sighed, and after an over exaggerated glare at A-Cheng, he brightened up, and practically bounced as he grinned. "Besides, I already have something like that and I even used it to tie Lan Zhan to me!"

"Oh do not start on him again!" A-Cheng whined as he threw a seed at Wei Wuxian, who neatly caught it and popped it into his mouth.

"Perhaps a way to easily get supplies?" Jiang Yanli mentioned before her boys could argue again over A-Xian's one-sided fascination with the Second Jade of Lan. "I don't think there has ever been a healer that stated they have enough supplies."

A-Xian tapped his brush handle on his lips, but it was obvious the idea wasn't appealing to him.

"A way to make their awful medicines taste like nice wine," Jiang Cheng tried, and they all laughed.

"Oh!" Jiang Yanli smiled, "perhaps a way to keep mixed medicines fresh? That way she can stock up on medicines in advance and not have to worry about wasting time to combine her medicine if the patient is critical and she needs an uncommon mix!"

"Or a way to keep people fresh until they get to her, even with grievous wounds," Jiang Cheng threw out.

A-Xian blinked, and she could see the thoughts flying through his eyes. "The process might even be able to be applied to keep food fresh! Think about it! Emperor's Smile whenever you want! And you could pack a bag with enough food for an entire winter and have it stay good!" He laughed loudly, and quickly started jotting ideas down.

A-Cheng just shook his head before laying down in the bottom of the boat. His booted feet nudged their way under Wei Wuxian's leg and his side pressed against her folded knees, though he carefully moved the large lily pad they picked earlier to hold their peeled lotus seeds onto his stomach where they all could reach before looping an arm under his head as a pillow to watch the clouds from.

Jiang Yanli moved so she was better seated against his side rather than sitting properly, and couldn't stop smiling as she admired the view.

It had been a long time since she had been this relaxed. Since things had been so...

So...

So perfect.

AN: On the timeline for JGY getting kicked down the stairs, it's while JGY was a teenager, but most likely after he was fourteen. Since Jin Zixaun was in Cloud recesses through 15-16, that means JGY most likely showed up at Carp Tower on the peacocks 15th or 17th birthday, unless Jin Guangshan celebrated his 16th birthday without him there or had him come back for it. Since I wanted it to be when WWX is with the Wens, 17th birthday it is!

And that last scene was meant to have angst and worries about Wen Ruohan and all sorts of things, but the siblings wanted fluff. So fluff.

PERSONAL AN: Hey all, soooo the IRL stuff I mentioned last time filtered into the delays for this chapter, and the majority of it was written on my phone as I hung out at the hospital, either waiting for my boyfriend to get out of surgery, for bloodwork, or other stuff, so you're getting a PSA. PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE remember to wear sunscreen/watch your skin for changes no matter how old you are, and if your body is doing weird stuff, talk to a doctor.

My boyfriend and I are a few years below the age that you'd expect to run into cancer at when it's not one of those horrible childhood cancers, but he had a few moles that worried me, and after MONTHS of my nagging, he finally saw a dermatologist. He was diagnosed with melanoma. It was past the "safe" zone, so on top of taking the mole out to biopsy they had to remove a larger chunk of flesh and several lymph nodes.

As he was recovering from that, I finally convinced his sorry ass to see a doctor on other things, and sure enough he also had early stage colon cancer.

Two different fucking cancers and if his ass hadn't seen a doctor when he did he'd be dead.

As I was finishing up all of that and dealing with a sewer back up and roof issues, one of my friends was rushed to emergency surgery and they yanked out her gallbladder which had like a bajillion gallstones. Doctors had been ignoring her complaints of stomach pains or writing it off as IBS.

I know that with all the stress/craziness of the world it's hard to pay attention to health focused basics for a lot of people, and it's even harder if you're in the US without insurance, but please take care of yourselves! And if you're constantly in pain and the Doctor ignores you, get second opinions! I like all of you alive and only in pain if it is kinky and you want to be in pain.

Anyway, that's enough of the personal stuff. Thanks for letting me rant at you!

# Chapter Five

## Chapter Notes

Thank you everyone for the well wishes! It's really appreciated! I really needed the support right now.

This chapter turned out longer and more introspective than I planned, but hopefully it is still okay!

Edits:

Posting the beta edits thanks to the amazing [Nonvocal Seagull \(FluffyTheTerrible\)](#)!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Wen Ruohan looked up from his list of categorized names to the young man bowing politely in front of him. The action contained the exact amount of deference, not cowering but not as deliberately provocative as Wei Wuxian would do either.

He placed the list of people that had spoken poorly of or had ill intentions in regards to his grandson down to pick up the larger cross-referenced scroll summarizing the evidence, including witnesses' names. The evidence itself was currently being reviewed by his secretaries, who looked torn in between horror and wanting to kidnap Meng Yao to chain him to their desks.

"This is quick work," Wen Ruohan stated. Wei Wuxian had only left for the Jiang two days ago, and while he would see him much sooner than usual given Wen Qing's upcoming birthday, that now familiar impatience still crept up his spine. He felt more annoyed at the feeling than anything else, knowing that his grandson remained further away from him on a regular basis than he currently wished only as a precursor to having the boy spend the majority of his time at the Nightless City.

Even if he gave Wei Wuxian Lotus Pier like he planned as he now possessed a capable aide that would prevent his old sect from taking advantage of him, when Wei Wuxian took his rightful place as part of the Wen Sect he would naturally gravitate home to Wen Ruohan's side.

"This humble one has listened to those around Young Master Wei since his arrival, as he wanted to repay the kindness shown to him."

Wen Ruohan highly doubted that was the only reason.

Meng Yao possessed a keen intellect and calculating mind, which had only grown more apparent in his current position.

Wen Ruohan once again felt impressed at his grandson's ability to root out and showcase the brilliance in others. It would serve him well in supporting Xu-er as his right hand when his son stood as acting sect leader after Wen Ruohan retired to cultivate and experiment in peace while indulging in spending time with his additional grandchildren. Because he would be getting more of them one way or another, he'd just need to plan through things carefully to avoid another mistake like Wen Chao from popping up in the line.

He leaned back in his chair, eyeing the young man from head to toe. They really needed to fix his cultivation, so even if he couldn't keep up with Wei Wuxian completely he'd at least be skilled enough to follow the scrapes that boy would likely get into. Right now Meng Yao's usefulness couldn't be properly utilized as he had not developed his core enough to use a sword yet.

Nighthunting, or even just Wei Wuxian's drinking nights would end in Meng Yao's death in his current state. He knew that due to the attachment Wei Wuxian had already developed for his assistant, he would be almost as upset as Wen Ruohan would be annoyed at the complete waste of a valuable resource.

All in all something to be avoided for now.

He tapped his fingers idly on the table, running through possible training and assignment adjustments. Meng Yao didn't have the physicality necessary to make strides in his cultivation yet, especially given the handicap his prior flawed practice caused. Even so, he'd proven himself to be far more diligent and resourceful than Wen Ruohan had expected when he assigned him to stay by Wei Wuxian's side. Perhaps he could balance things to be a bit less cultivation-focused while Meng Yao worked to correct his physical and spiritual deficiencies? Based on the reports from his teachers, reducing some of the practice hours outside of classes likely wouldn't impact Meng Yao's slow progress.

"Do you have any special recommendations for anyone on the list?" He queried. He already knew how he wanted to handle most of the people referenced, but he may as well continue testing Meng Yao who once more bowed politely before rising to meet his eyes, speaking clearly and concisely as if he had planned for the question.

"Most of the servants are rightfully nervous as changes in the families they serve can lead to danger to them, but all are grateful to Young Master Wei and truly enjoy his company. They wish him well and hope that he retains your favor. However, there are several who preferred assisting Second Young Master Wen, who I feel should either be moved to serve in the Inferno Palace or be removed from service to ensure Young Master's Wei continued comfort."

Wen Ruohan grinned at how carefully Meng Yao phrased that. If Wen Ruohan removed the recommended servants from service by transferring them, firing them, or killing them, it all fit, and Meng Yao could say that he had advised him rightly. "Any cultivators you'd turn your eye on?"

"Ladies Deng Liqin and Yi Qingge should be made examples of," Meng Yao stated clearly. Wen Ruohan couldn't stop a bark of laughter. He'd always hated those two concubines of Wen Chao's and they themselves quickly learned not to be seen by him.



He glanced at the list.

Apparently the two had been trying to regain favor for Wen Chao by undermining Wei Wuxian. He flicked his fingers and one of his secretaries quickly left the room. The ladies could finally be useful for once as an evening's entertainment for him in the Inferno Palace. It would be good stress relief, given that he'd been so busy lately he'd barely had time to relax.

"A few more of Second Young Master Wen's cohort, including several of his favorite guards, should be reassigned to be safe. Either to the Inferno Palace or to more rural night hunting opportunities in smaller groups so they are insulated from opportunities to plot." Most of Wen Chao's cohort ranked very poorly skill wise, so sending them on Night Hunt's in small groups basically meant sending them to their deaths in a way that left their hands clean even if their families wanted to risk annoying him over it.

Meng Yao was a treasure. Smart, clever, pragmatic, and with a line of thinking that worked well in line with Wen Ruohan's own. Add in some additional training outside of getting his cultivation up to a decent level and this boy would truly serve Wei Wuxian well and be an amazing asset to the Wen.

While he did like the idea of using this particular bastard to rule over what would remain of the Jin, he also liked the idea of adopting him into a branch family. Ahh well, he'd wait and see how things shaped up after Meng Yao got some more training and experience. After all, opportunities like this were a large part of the reason he had delayed his plans. It would be nice to see some of the results first hand.

"Lady Zhao Jiaying, and perhaps Lady Hu Chuntao, deserve some appeasement." Wen Ruohan nodded in agreement, he had been thinking much the same thing about Zhao Jiaying, though hadn't made any decisions on Hu Chuntao yet.

Hu Chuntao was as much of an idiot as Chao-er, but her grandfather had been one of his main tutors in his youth. As honorable as being a concubine could be if the family ranked as prestigiously as his own, Wen Ruohan knew that she could have easily gained a position as a first wife of considerable standing if she wasn't dumb enough to fall for Wen Chao's flattery and gifts. Those had dried up as soon as the fool's attention shifted to the next pretty girl. Her father would undoubtedly be behind her poorly executed flirting with Wei Wuxian, as the man liked to think himself as smart as his own father.

In reality, Wen Ruohan kept him assigned to hand delivering orders passed down through his secretary to the prominent civilian families of his distant territories so he never needed to see the fool. He really only kept the man around due to the respect he held for his late tutor but he would kill the man if he had to listen to him for more than a minute, and even that thin strand of patience seemed thinner given this latest round of machinations.

On the other hand, Wen Chao's official wife, Lady Zhao Jiaying's father, ranked highly among his main field commanders, and he was competent enough to have survived the purge after Wen Chao's idiocy tainted so many of those responsible for leading Wen Ruohan's disciples. The man cared for his daughter, with good reason as the lovely woman boasted quite a large range of competencies and skills. Her quick wit and bloodline had been why Wen Ruohan married her to his second son. Given Wen Chao's currently nebulous position of

disfavor, someone as smart as her would look for options. It made sense that she'd try to ingratiate herself to Wei Wuxian as she already knew of Wen Xu's lack of interest. Zhao Jiaying likely did it on her own too, especially as her mother was dead and her father had no care for anything but night hunting and other marital matters. Per the notes, she conducted herself in a perfectly respectful and understated manner as she tried to catch Wei Wuxian's eye. Truly a great lady nearly on par with Wen Ruohan's own late wife.

While she had been able to quickly and easily absolve herself of any of Wen Chao's failures, their marriage had yet been dissolved. Wen Ruohan hadn't recommended it, given he would need sharp minds like hers to balance out how much of a moron his son was in order to have smart grandchildren, and Zhao Jiaying knew her place well enough not to ask for a divorce immediately even though it had been in her rights to do so. If she managed to seduce another of his favorites, however, she would have a legitimate reason for asking for the dissolution of her marriage to Wen Chao.

And if Wei Wuxian did marry her, their child would be...

Oh think of how brilliant his great grandchild would be!

If his grandchild was such a wonder, imagine his great grandchild!

It would be a minor disappointment if he didn't get more grandchildren, but that would surely be eclipsed by the absolute joy of great grandchildren through Wei Wuxian.

That might just be the answer to quite a few of his problems.

Maybe Wen Ruohan could talk Wei Wuxian into marrying Zhao Jiaying just for the sake of carrying on the line?

He really needed to see how seriously Wei Wuxian felt for Lan Wangji, and how likely the Lans would be to whine if the Second Jade didn't marry in as the primary spouse.

"Gong Ying," his secretary that dealt mainly with coordinating things with his household and Qian Heng, looked up from what appeared to be an itemized list of delivery discrepancies. "Get Meng Yao a *dì sān* token." That would allow him to direct all servants not assigned to Wen Ruohan or Wen Xu directly, rather than just the eight currently assigned to Wei Wuxian, as well as the palace and perimeter guards. Not that he seemed to have any issues working with them anyway given the compiled evidence, but it would clarify the line of command and ensure Wen Ruohan received copies of Meng Yao's requests.

"Sect Leader Ruohan," Meng Yao bowed deeper in gratitude to him.

"Also," Wen Ruohan smiled sharply, "a ten percent pay increase and move him to one of the golden pheasant residences." Gong Ying noted it, and Meng Yao wasn't quite quick enough at bowing and thanking him to hide his smile, but it was a marked improvement in maintaining his expression from the last time the man had come to him with his recommendation for formalizing Wei Wuxian's staff.

Meng Yao showed excellent aptitude for intelligence work, and for a very brief moment Wen Ruohan felt quite tempted to just move him to one of those divisions anyway, but he dismissed the thought. His grandson deserved only the best, especially as he drew chaos in like air and remained far too vulnerable with his kind heart. A skilled assistant needed to be by Wei Wuxians' side as a shield and sword both. They needed to be someone that Wen Ruohan could count on to wring all the blood, hope, joy, and spirit from any idiot that committed the hubris of daring to think about harming his grandson.

Oh well, he'd just have to get as much use out of Meng Yao as possible until he could be attached to Wei Wuxian a hundred percent of the time and not just during the far too infrequent times his grandson resided in the Nightless City. He may as well use the opportunity to get Meng Yao access to most of the files and records he would need to keep apprised of everything regarding Wei Wuxian as well.

"When not assisting in Wei Wuxian's affairs and correcting your cultivation, you will report to my spymaster."

"Yes, Sect Leader," Meng Yao acknowledged with a bright gleam in his eye, his dimples giving him an air of softness absolutely incongruent with his razor sharp mind.

XxXxX

"Think of qi like rice flour, and your body like water, cause you know, bodies are mostly liquid!" Wei Wuxian grinned at him, holding his hands cupped in his palms while circulating his energy through them to let Meng Yao feel the way it moved. "If you add too much qi too quickly, or don't circulate it right, it gets all gooey and clumpy which causes those hiccups."

Meng Yao hummed, closing his eyes to focus more on the flow of energy Wei Wuxian was demonstrating without the distraction of bright silver eyes. The fourth thing Wei Wuxian did after arriving in the Nightless City for Wen Qing's birthday was to ask about Meng Yao's cultivation practice. He hadn't taken "it's nothing to be worried over" at face value, which Meng Yao should've anticipated even though he had only spent his prior visit as his assistant.

While Wei Wuxian excelled in many areas, everything related to cultivation was his obvious favorite, closely followed by children, and then teaching.

Which meant that Wei Wuxian, rather than running off to find Wen Qionglin or Wen Xu to pester or doing anything else of value prior to the customary dinner for his arrival, had plopped his still drying form at a table, wet hair tumbling like a waterfall over his red robe that clung indecently in various spots from the dampness. He knew for a fact the room contained towels and everything needed to dry Wei Wuxian off, but the Young Master had seemed to forget them in his distraction over something interesting and shiny. He'd started prodding Meng Yao to walk him through his current exercises with an exuberance that Meng Yao would have found exhausting in most other circumstances.

Given Wei Wuxian would only be in the Nightless City for the three days around Wen Qing's birthday, Meng Yao thought this a tragic waste of time that he could use for relationship building with the Wens and other important individuals in residence for the celebrations. However with only a short amount of time to make first hand observations, Meng Yao had

yet to figure out a guaranteed way of redirecting Wei Wuxian from what he deemed “educational opportunities”.

Not that Meng Yao wanted to argue very hard as this showcased his own favor and Wei Wuxian truly was talented at teaching, having already helped him figure out several of the difficulties he had been experiencing.

Cultivating spiritual power relied far too much on emotions and intent for his liking.

“My qi is like a young maiden’s first attempt at steamed rice cakes.” Meng Yao joked self-deprecatingly.

Wei Wuxian laughed. “Those are still delicious though! And practicing it means you get to eat all the trials!”

Meng Yao sighed, wishing that he had a tea cup’s worth of talent that Wei Wuxian did. While the tutors assigned by Wen Ruohan to get Meng Yao up to speed didn’t say anything, he could easily tell they thought he would never be remotely powerful. He would take no small amount of joy in shoving his progress from today down their condescending throats as soon as Wei Wuxian left, even though he agreed with their overall opinion. “The years I have lost practicing seem to have taken a toll on my abilities.”

“They say that, but I didn’t really start training until I was ten!”

Meng Yao’s eyes flew open, and he couldn’t help the shock overcoming his features. Standard training for young masters began almost from the cradle, and they could use spiritual energy by their seventh year, with most having formed golden cores by their ninth, and gifted a sword at ten years even if they didn’t get to properly use the things until their twelfth. Apparently you needed to meditate with the swords and bond with them and things that Meng Yao would have thought absolutely ridiculous.

Wei Wuxian laughed again, looking a little sheepish. “It is definitely easier if you start training younger, and I mean, I had some idea of basic practices from what my parents taught me before they died so I had a head start. I knew enough to circulate my qi, which is probably the only reason I survived all those winters on the streets as a kid.” His grin in no way matched what Meng Yao would consider appropriate for the topic.

With his new access to the Wen’s spy network, he had been able to review the reports of Wei Wuxian’s current living situation. Though to his shame, he had yet to finish all of the historical documentation, which included the Young Master’s childhood. He would need to remedy that immediately.

“Not that I remember much aside from dogs, which are evil beasts that shouldn’t be trusted no matter what anyone says!” Meng Yao had learned the location of the kennels but only filed the information away. He’d need to meet the kennel master and ensure that all the handlers maintained excellent control of their charges, and possibly impose new boundaries for where the animals could wander.

“I was really really behind when Uncle Jiang found me, and then it took forever to convince Madam Yu to let me be trained! Not that I blame her, they had to teach me to read and write and everything else first! I had an even more hole filled head then if you can believe it!” He smiled, releasing Meng Yao’s hands to rap his knuckles into his forehead before sinking into his chair.

He carefully pulled back his own hands to clench them in his lap, twisting them in his robes to hopefully alleviate some of the sudden coldness. Meng Yao took note to remind Deng Changming to light the braziers if needed. “I see no holes in your head, Young Master.” He couldn’t stop a grin as Wei Wuxian threw his head back and laughed.

“Just wait! I would forget my own head if it wasn’t attached!” Meng Yao had been told by Deng Changming and the other servants that Wei Wuxian could be absent minded at times, not remembering where he’d left things or recalling talismans that he’d worked on even the day before.

There were also times, names, or encounters he’d had with people that escaped him.

Further questioning revealed many of those specific instances to be with people who had initially looked down on or treated Wei Wuxian poorly, though. It seemed to Meng Yao more of a practiced way to keep himself happy by deliberately not recalling the bad things, but still spoke to a trend of behavior.

Meng Yao remembered the women at the brothel that came from the streets or particularly poor families, who did not have consistent food growing up. They could be much the same as Wei Wuxian. Most had bad memories and trouble concentrating, others weren’t as quick, or didn’t grow as tall. Most hoarded every bit of food or money they could get their hands on, though more rarely they ended up like Wei Wuxian and shared every morsel of food they acquired with those they cared for. Many managed to overcome the hurdles their lack of upbringing caused, however some never did.

“While my upbringing was not the most reputable, I was blessed with a mother that worked hard to keep the two of us housed and fed,” Meng Yao stated. He could give many logical reasons for discussing this, but found that he just wanted to confide in Wei Wuxian. He was most likely the only one among the upper classes or sects that would be empathetic rather than dismissive, insulting, or worse, sympathetic to his history.

Sure enough Wei Wuxian smiled softly. “The least reputable people are often the best. The butchers at the edge of town would occasionally slip me some gristle and keep the dogs away while I ate it, and there were these sisters at a brothel that would let me curl up near their kitchen fire during the winter for a few errands. They’d even slip me treats and steamed buns sometimes too! They were the best women in the world aside from my shijie!”

Meng Yao smiled brightly, a pressure behind his eyes that would turn to tears if he allowed it. “My mother was employed at a brothel.”

“I bet she was awesome if she gave birth to someone as amazing as you with a nightmare like Jin Guangshan as a dad. And you definitely got her brains too! If the peacock was even a quarter as smart as you, I might not have minded him for my shijie as much!” Wei Wuxian

laughed, and Meng Yao fought the urge to bow as it would only serve to embarrass the other. “What was your mother’s name?”

Meng Yao dipped his head, the pressure behind his eyes getting worse. “Meng Shi, her name is Meng Shi.”

“Ahhh I’ve heard of her! I lived in Yiling and we weren’t too far from Yunping! Some of the sisters talked about wanting to be like her since she was so smart and pretty that men came from everywhere to see her.” He knew for certain that they said far less flattering things as well, given the fact that she had been aging and performed the sin of giving birth to him. Still Wei Wuxian does not lie, so he had no doubt that the words were uttered at some point.

“It gladdens this humble one to hear the Young Master say that,” Meng Yao finally worked out.

Wei Wuxian made an overly loud muling sound, sprawling back in his chair dramatically enough that Meng Yao couldn’t help biting back a smile that pressed even harder at his eyes. “Ahh A-Yao! Please just call me Wei Wuxian! It hurts this humble one to have a friend that calls him something so formal!”

Meng Yao couldn’t help but duck his head, pleased at the nickname from Wei Wuxian, even if he called Deng Changming “A-Ming”, and had nicknames for almost everyone he even remotely liked, it still felt personal. “This humble one would not wish to imply any impropriety in public.”

“No no no! Don’t you go dismissing all my hard work by implying that people think I am proper! I’m a bastion of shameless impropriety! Just ask anyone! If you’re nervous about it, I’ll ask Sect Leader Wen to reassure you that I’d be the one to get in trouble for anything. I’m sure he’d agree!”

Meng Yao couldn’t help but laugh a little at that. He doubted Sect Leader Wen would ever consider Wei Wuxian “in trouble”. He might actually agree to the odd request as the boy apparently never asked for anything more than a specific dish to be made, even though Wen Ruohan and Wen Xu enjoyed showering gifts on him.

“That is not needed,” he stated. “While in public, I think that Young Master Wei is more appropriate, in private I do not think I would mind calling a friend A-Xian.” Wei Wuxian practically launched out of his chair in a cheer to hug him.

“Hahaha! Thank you, A-Yao! We’re going to be best friends, I can tell!”

Meng Yao tentatively lifted his arms around Wei Wuxian, not sure what to do with such exuberant touching. No wonder he was considered shameless if he did things like this without thought. He didn’t quite know what to do with someone bright and wonderful like Wei Wuxian. The other needed to warn him before showing him such affection. Meng Yao needed to practice with others to respond properly. He needed to... To do something to be worthy of this. “I’m not sure how to be friends with you. I have not had many friends before. And the only one that really helped me, helped my mother, like you— she is much older, so I do not think our relationship will be similar,” he forced out. He did not like revealing

weakness, or admitting his flaws, but he needed... He needed Wei Wuxian to see him. To let him catch up.

“Just be you! What is your other friend’s name?”

Meng Yao laughed dryly, pulling away from Wei Wuxian and trying to compose himself. “It’s... Her name is Sisi.” He carefully explained how Sisi had been one of the few women in the brothel that stood up for him and his mother, how she had been kind to them when others derided them. How she had comforted him after his mother died, before he had left the brothel as he was no longer protected by his mother. It didn’t matter if he’d been doing the books and all sorts of other tasks for years, he had his mother’s small, petite fame and pretty face. It hadn’t been long after his mother died that the Madam started making a few veiled inquiries about him to the guests with certain tendencies.

Those comments had been what caused him to finally get up the courage to leave with his mother’s pearl token in hand, to search for the father that failed to come for them even though his mother never gave up hope.

He explained how he used his and his mother’s meager savings to give her as nice of a burial as he could before he left, but still not being able to afford a plaque or anything really nice, then giving Sisi the pittance that remained to go towards buying her freedom before he left for Lanling.

Meng Yao had never imagined how poorly the meeting with his father would go. While he felt humiliated and furiously angry, the largest part of him felt ashamed that he couldn’t fulfill his mother’s dreams for him to stand at his father’s side as a cultivator, for Jin Guangshan to love them and be proud of the son she had raised for him. Not that Wei Wuxian needed to know he still regretted not being welcomed by his father when he had helped him and given him such an incredible opportunity.

“So Sisi is still at the brothel?” Wei Wuxian asked, drawing him from his thoughts.

“Yes,” Meng Yao bowed. “With my new salary, I hope to use my first break to go to Yunping to give my mother a proper burial, and see how Sisi fares.”

Sisi had told him to leave and never come back, that the only way he could really honor his mother was to fulfill her dreams for him. Still she’d had tears in her eyes and she’d seen him off with well wishes. He’d intended to repay her kindness towards them once he stood by his father’s side, to buy her freedom and set her up somewhere as a shopkeeper or do anything else she wanted.

He knew that if Wei Wuxian did not save him that day, he wouldn’t have had the face to see her again after so thoroughly failing at seeing his mother’s wishes through.

“When is your first break?” Wei Wuxian asked. “Is it when I’m here? Can I go with you? I’d love to meet your mother and Sisi. Badass sisters like that are the best!”

Meng Yao bowed his head again. “It is in five months, at my half year date.”

“That is so long away!” Wei Wuxian whined and flailed, before suddenly perking up. A truly horrible feeling started in Meng Yao’s gut. “I know! We can go there today!”

Meng Yao choked. No! Absolutely not! Sect Leader Wen would in no way be happy if Wei Wuxian missed his welcome dinner, and Yunping was far enough away they’ll miss both that and Wen Qing’s birthday at the drastically slower rate Meng Yao could travel as his core lacked the power for him to fly on his own. “I appreciate the thought, but unfortunately I cannot fly fast enough, and Wen Ruohan has prepared a welcome feast for you.”

“We can send him a note, and you can fly with me! We’ll be back by morning at the latest that way!”

“Sisi would be expected to entertain customers this evening, A-Xian, and may be booked already. It wo-”

Wei Wuxian grinned brightly. “So we just need cash and someone that can out glare anyone that gets in our way!” Meng Yao absolutely did not wail in despair as Wei Wuxian rushed out of the room, startling Tang Heng who had been standing outside in shouting distance in case Wei Wuxian needed anything, but he came close.

XxXxX

“A-Xu!” Wen Xu turned to look down the hall to where A-Xian raced towards him, that new aide of his hot on his heels, silently panicking in the background. Given that Meng Yao had risen so quickly in his Father’s favor specifically because of his intelligence, thoroughness, ability to be well prepared, and not panic, Wen Xu found the sight fairly amusing.

“Hello, A-Xian,” he nodded his head in greeting, and A-Xian beamed at him.

“Do you have plans this afternoon?” The bright ball of sunshine practically bounced where he stood, silver eyes sparkling in clear excitement. If whatever adventure he had in mind caused his assistant so much panic it would certainly be something entertaining. He had a training session and a meeting with the head of the Wen contingent in Yanguang, but those could be easily rescheduled.

Wen Xu smiled, “Not particularly.”

“Would you be willing to come glare at people for us please? I’ll buy you dinner to make up for it! And breakfast too depending on how long it takes us to fly there and back! But we’ll definitely be back for Wen Qing’s birthday celebration!”

Wen Xu blinked. “What?”

“And do you think Sect Leader Wen would mind if I borrowed some money to spend at a brothel and pay for a funeral? I promise to pay it back!”

XxXxX

Wen Ruohan stared.



Blinked.

Stared some more.

Well...

He had anticipated that as soon as Wei Wuxian learned of the money in his accounts and was reassured he could spend it however he wanted, his grandson would use the majority of his funds on street rats and other destitutes.

He hadn't thought that would include buying a brothel.

Meng Yao looked like he wanted to sink into the floor as he explained the previous night's events.

"The Madam then said that if Wei Wuxian had a problem with how she ran things, he should open his own brothel. Wei Wuxian told her that was foolish and wouldn't solve the immediate problem, which started another round of yelling, so Young Master Wen interrupted and told Young Master Wei to just buy the brothel since he had enough money in the accounts you gave him."

Given that despite how many times he had debated with himself over it, Wen Ruohan hadn't informed Wei Wuxian of his accounts yet as he didn't think the boy was ready to accept them, he could very well imagine his grandson's reaction to that.

"While Young Master Wei was... recovering... from that knowledge, Young Master Wen rather strongly negotiated the cost of the brothel with the Madam, in a manner that..." He trailed off, and Wen Ruohan felt proud that Xu-er had been such a force that he left someone as silver tongued as Meng Yao speechless. "Well, we may hear a complaint from the Jiangs if she goes high enough."

Wen Ruohan sighed, while he understood why Xu-er didn't kill her with Wei Wuxian watching, as his grandson had opinions on killing civilians, it would have been cleaner if his son ended everything last night.

Perhaps he'd have Meng Yao to do it. Let him have the final revenge on the woman as a bonus for his hard work.

Or maybe he could use the incident to undercut the Jiang for allowing such behavior to go on in their territory? Cultivation sects did not normally interfere with civilian matters but made exceptions in circumstances likely to cause spiritual issues like restless spirits, fierce corpses, yao, or the like, and a brothel in such poor management seemed like trouble down the line.

"We then spent part of the night arranging for improvements to the building, for a doctor to visit, and to have the pay system rearranged to better favor the women. He also created minimum age restrictions for the prostitutes while Wen Xu hunted down a few of the clients tha-

Wen Ruohan threw his head back and laughed, interrupting him. He'd known his son and grandson would make a wonderful team in whatever they put their minds to. He'd also been absolutely correct in how it would be, Wei Wuxian taking care of their people while Xu-er made sure their enemies bled for their hubris.

His patience was finally beginning to pay off.

Now he just needed to find a way to let them loose on a wider scale and still get them to family dinners on time.

XxXxX

Wen Qing's birthday celebration had turned into a pit of gossip. Not that she minded too much, as the attention paid to Wen Xu and Wei Wuxian's adventure last night in Yunping kept most of the focus off her, letting her sip her tea in relative peace. Wen Ruohan had taken the opportunity of having several of his favorites together, starting off a round of tall tales of youthful misadventures. Most of the room became drawn in, laughing and setting the tone for a rather light hearted evening.

The best part was that factoring in the lack of Wen Chao and the reasons for it, the annoying failures of humanity who normally followed him around aping him were on their best behavior. Their desire to appear as unlike the Second Young Master as possible meant they weren't groping the maids, bothering the dancers, or drinking to excess.

The whole ordeal, even with Wen Xu practically hanging off of Wei Wuxian while laughing – actual laughing, not just his usual dark chuckles, actually ranked up there as probably the most enjoyable banquet that she'd ever attended at the Nightless City. That fact was even more surprising given that the previous night Wen Ruohan had actually looked, if he was say hypothetically a five year old and not one of Wen Qing's worst nightmares, like a huffy cat whose toy had been put away when Wen Xu and Wei Wuxian missed out on Wei Wuxian's welcome dinner. Wen Ruohan was not prone to shows of uncontrolled emotion, and if he felt negatively enough to show it, he generally stayed that way for extended periods of time.

That he was smiling and actually laughing right now seemed...

She'd known that Wei Wuxian would cause trouble eventually. Even at Cloud Recesses he'd been a magnet for every weird, out of the ordinary, unusual thing, and worse, he failed horribly at ignoring that. He always had to try and help, whether by befriending the friendless like Wen Ning and Lan Wangji (not that he'd succeeded on that front) or fighting fierce corpses unarmed or pulling idiots out of waterborne abysses, or tutoring people rather than studying himself.

So Wen Qing had accepted that chaos would follow Wei Wuxian to the Nightless City. She just hadn't known how things would fall out as a result. While the upheavals caused by Wei Wuxian crashing into Sect Leader Wen's court could lead to opportunities to better secure her family's safety, it also carried even greater risks. Wen Qing had planned to float through the events that would happen like a leaf on the wind, ready for any unexpected turbulence.

That hadn't lasted for a single joint visit.

Wen Ning cared too much for his best, if not only, real friend who treated him better than anyone except Wen Qing. Who genuinely cared just as much back, actively seeking him out and engaging with him in a way Wen Qing couldn't as his sister.

Wen Qing herself may have found his puppy eyes almost as hard to say no to as her brother's when paired with a good reason, which Wei Wuxian almost always had. If she also rather guiltily enjoyed having an equal verbal sparring partner that wasn't as vicious or prone to carry through on threats as Wen Xu, well, she took her small pleasures where she could. Getting to team up on Wen Chao had been an unexpectedly pleasant bonus.

Then Wei Wuxian had idiotically exemplified his sect's motto and somehow given Wen Ning the courage to overcome all the years of Wen Chao's vicious mockery leading to him, of all the stupid, reckless, dumb things to do, being his damn near perfect self in front of Wen Ruohan.

And something happened in the Wen Sect that Wen Qing never thought she'd ever see.

Change.

And mostly for the better too.

Take last night's odd adventure between her ruthless pit viper of a cousin Wen Xu and the fluffy, sunshiny, bunny with fangs that was Wei Wuxian.

While Wen Xu didn't visit brothels as often as Wen Chao, he'd visited occasionally with the pack of viciously cruel rodents that made up his loose cohort of minions. Because they were minions, not friends. She doubted Wen Xu ever had a friend in his life.

From reliable reports, Wen Xu spent most of those nights eating, maybe having a little wine, and if he was in the mood he'd pay a prostitute not for sex, but to play weiqi or cards. If none of those interested him, he'd sit in a corner and just watch the main room or meditate.

She knew because he'd bluntly told her during a routine medical check up that he'd had sex, but he'd found the whole experience messy and not worth the momentary pleasure it brought. He occasionally indulged, but the experiences were quick, efficient, and possibly caused by boredom. Wen Qing noted he could perform then washed her hands of it until he eventually married for duty, and even then she would only touch the issue if he asked.

For Wei Wuxian, well. In spite of the rumors about him as well as some of his more pathetically infantile jokes or boasts, Wen Qing saw first hand how flustered and embarrassed he'd gotten when she vented her frustrations after four female disciples in one day came to her shamefaced to report pregnancies. After talking through options so many times, and hearing the word accident in each discussion, she despaired that they couldn't count to thirty or any other number of days they needed to time their safer days and for whatever reasons hadn't the sense to drink a morning after tea just in case. Given the pressure Wen Ruohan was putting on all his disciples to be at their best currently, they should have known to be more careful than ever.

Sometimes given the things she experienced in her profession, Wen Qing thought she numbered among the very few people in the cultivation world that had common sense.

After all, she had only needed to see thirty seconds of Wei Wuxian's reaction to her rant to realize that despite his frantic insistence, Wei Wuxian was in fact a virgin whose knowledge probably came only from teenage boys being teenage boys and spring books. Anyone that saw this awkward, self-doubting dork wrapped in an armor of fluff, smiles, and lightning quick brilliance and actually thought he was not, needed their head examined.

Which validated her theory about being among the minority in possessing common sense, as nearly everyone believed Wei Wuxian to have long ago started indulging in sex as much as he drank or invoked chaos disguised as training exercises.

Wen Qing had promptly paralyzed him with a needle and gave him the safe sex talk. For all he whined, whimpered, moaned, and cried like a baby, as a very well regarded too damn pretty young master with Wen Ruohan's favor on top of being the First Disciple of Yunmeng Jiang, Wei Wuxian would be a target for a large number of women. It wouldn't matter if they looked to make a good match, climb the social ladder, or even just have his baby so he'd need to support them or be shamed by the cultivation world since he didn't have the title of sect leader like a certain someone to get away with being a failure of a father to his byblows.

As he'd argued with her about how not important he was, it struck her like an unpulled blow in the sparring ring. Wei Wuxian didn't realize that he actually counted as a very eligible marriage partner who would probably make a decent husband with his caring nature. She'd been even more baffled when it finally dawned on her that he probably had only vaguely recognized the final steps of what flirting would lead to. Wei Wuxian liked complimenting others, being nice, and getting people to like him. He had no other goal. More often than not harmless light flirting like he engaged in didn't hurt anyone, especially when the girls he flirted with liked to flirt back just as casually.

Unfortunately Wei Wuxian was an oblivious idiot and didn't realize that some of the women around him now would definitely take him up on the flirting, especially since he had the bad luck to look almost as adorable as Wen Ning when he blushed and stammered. The scheming and oftentimes ruthless women that thrived in the cutthroat atmosphere Wen Ruohan encouraged would definitely want to wrap the boy around their fingers and Wei Wuxian was so love starved he would let them.

Wen Qing had doubled down on her lecture, getting into all the gory details she normally skimmed over, explained everything she could think of, and in the end had instilled a healthy respect for sex and other intimate acts in Wei Wuxian.

She hadn't gone far enough to scare him, but she'd definitely gone far enough that he was more aware of people's pointed interest in him and what they likely wanted.

Wen Qing had even broached the issue with Wen Ruohan so he could take steps to make sure that Wei Wuxian's lack of understanding wouldn't get him into trouble.

In short, the last people on the planet she expected to go to a brothel on their own, except for maybe that icicle of a Second Jade, were Wen Xu and Wei Wuxian.

But they hadn't only gone to a brothel - they'd bought it.

And all because Wen Xu had lost his temper at someone of a lower status but for once didn't kill them.

Wen Qing had checked it multiple times because she found the idea mind boggling that the previous owner wasn't dead yet, and that the altercation had occurred without Wen Xu just burning the place down from frustration, whores and all.

The possibility, well probability, that the former owner would be killed after Wei Wuxian returned to Yunmeng tomorrow for the disrespect she had shown still existed, but still Wen Xu had held in his temper for even a short while. He'd thought something through that wasn't a physical fight, sadistic taunt, or the brutal destruction of all that annoyed him. And he'd done it for Wei Wuxian.

He'd thought of how someone would feel that wasn't about him or his father. He'd changed enough that he could actually laugh and not sound like a villain in a stage play. For the first time in a long time Wen Qing couldn't be certain that he would react the way she expected.

Tonight, for example, Wen Xu actually engaged Wen Ning in conversation without being prompted. The subject was even appropriate and not about some new atrocity he committed. He'd asked about helping with a few of the night hunts Wen Ning would be monitoring in his new role as a part time instructor, and hadn't gotten exasperated when her brother stammered out his answers. Wen Xu'd even complimented some of Wen Ning's lesson plans!

He hadn't been angry or jealous when Wei Wuxian had given her three different talismans where he had only received one. She'd seen it before where he would copy his father and use any possible hint of an insult or disrespect to draw blood, so had been expecting him to try and force some type of concession from her. Instead he'd just complimented Wei Wuxian's work.

Wen Qing eyed the scrolls that had been hung in a place of honor among her gifts. On them copies of the enlarged talisman drafts were drawn in beautiful calligraphy, each accented by a gorgeously drawn medicinal plant. Golden larch swept along the side of one, foxglove tumbling along the bottom of the next, and mint creeping along the last.

Despite how much Wei Wuxian downplayed them, everyone knew that the talismans held significant value in the revenue they could drive. But to Wen Qing, they came so close to priceless that she could hardly breathe.

The first talisman, if carved into a clay jar and fired, would keep any liquids contained in it in the exact same state that they went in for up to a year. The idiotic boy had apologized that he hadn't been able to quite figure out something similar for pills yet and she'd wanted to call him ten types of idiot.

The second would paralyze a wounded person so they could not struggle and further hurt themselves, similar to her needles, except without the inherent risk of having an acupuncture needle in someone in an unstable situation. It also significantly slowed the blood flow, which was dangerous long term but if used as a stopgap could get someone to her without them

bleeding out. It could also be pre-charged with spiritual energy, though Wei Wuxian yet again lamented that he'd failed to get it to work for as long as he wanted, as the longest the charge would stay was a single day. But even that would be more than enough in most cases.

The last talisman... She had no words.

Wei Wuxian explained that he'd stumbled across it by accident as he tested the second talisman. He'd gotten frustrated as the rate of blood flow reduced inconsistently, so poked around trying to figure out why. If he'd had more medical knowledge then the field trauma triage he'd been trained in for night hunts and the, in his words, "fastest read through on anatomy ever, and seriously Wen Qing, I didn't know bodies were so disgusting! You must have nerves of steel to do what you do, I could never!" Wei Wuxian probably wouldn't have been able to do what he did.

He'd have accepted it as a known fact that giving blood from one person to another was dangerous. In a rare instance or two it turned out fine, but in most cases it caused a death worse than the blood loss doctors tried to prevent and no one could figure out why. It was a method of last resort when there were no other options and the patient would probably die anyway.

It was so dangerous and unpredictable that most believed the gods themselves were against it. That you needed to be whole when you were put to rest in order to be reborn whole in your next life.

Wen Qing had treated enough people who sacrificed their blood, limbs, organs, and every other part of their body in the unselfish defense of innocents that she refused to think they wouldn't be reborn just as whole, just as amazing, as they were in this life.

She'd done so much research, written so many treatises on possible ways to transfer things from organs to blood to even golden cores no matter how much quietly whispered scorn or disdain she received from the more venerable healers.

So many of them only openly proclaimed that she was a prodigy because of her position as Wen Ruohan's favorite, especially as many of her theories could not be proven due to the risk. They privately decried her as fool hardy, a mere hedge healer, or a pretty ornament that wanted to be flattered by being told she was intelligent.

Wei Wuxian had unknowingly figured out the reason so many of her early experiments failed to the point she had to put her theories aside for the time.

And it was so simple she wanted to kick herself.

Just as there were different types of spiritual energy, there were different types of blood.

He had apparently run around like an idiot after getting the idea, asking people who had rightfully refused to give him blood so he could test his theory. Wei Wuxian had developed the talisman on the fly to test people's blood without them needing to actually bleed. Further refinements and experimenting that had been surprisingly well documented from the notes he

showed her found eight different types of blood, and he'd keyed the talisman to glow a different color for each one.

He'd started trying to figure out how they reacted to each other, but hadn't gotten very far as he'd wanted to add the variables into the second talisman to make it more consistent first and that had taken longer than he'd planned as his antics in asking people to bleed had earned him extra drills, which Wei Wuxian sounded absolutely ashamed of and called himself dumb for not being able to complete it all.

Wen Qing had lost her own Wen temper then, screaming at him that he was an idiot for even even thinking that and whoever told him otherwise was even more idiotic, and that if she caught him calling himself dumb ever again she'd put so many needles in him he'd look like a porcupine.

She could research the reactions herself. In her position she had plenty of access to blood to test.

Trust Wei Wuxian to make such a discovery and think it lacking. That he would give her such gifts with the absolute trust she would use them well made tears well up in her eyes for the first time since her parents died, not that she allowed them to fall.

She was Wen Qing, the most gifted healer of her generation. She had too much to do in order to protect her brother and her family which now included an absolute menace while staying in Wen Ruohan's good graces to waste time on tears.

XxXxX

Wen Xu grinned into his wine cup as he listened in on the wagging tongues around him.

The fools were either too stupid or too weak to realize that he could, so were being far too free with their tongues.

The trick to enhancing one's hearing with cultivation was a basic one taught to junior disciples. It should, for any half decent cultivator, be instinctive, just like enhancing one's body to be light on your feet. They should know that he was in hearing range, and thus lower their voices accordingly so that only someone next to them with equally enhanced hearing could hear.

He shook his head lightly. None of these renowned and so called powerful high ranking worms deserved their positions. Wen Xu felt a warm buzz of anticipation deep in his gut as came up with ideas to punish them for the hubris of saying anything even remotely negative about his Father and A-Xian.

His father was Wen Ruohan.

And A-Xian, though not a Wen, was his father's, and Wen Xu's.

They may have delayed their plans to remind everyone of their place, but that did not mean fools like these should think themselves able to speak poorly of their betters.

He waved the waiter down, indicating he wanted more of the spicy salted nuts that A-Xian had introduced him to. They were one of the few redeemable things about being in Yao Clan territory. There had been some type of demon problem, and just like always Sect Leader Yao seemed incapable of handling it on his own. His panic had resulted in disciples from all the Great Sects coming, and as a result, gossiping.

Wen Xu didn't understand why such a thing happened the moment there was more than one cultivator within a li of each other, however as he had learned from A-Xian, it could be far more useful than he had ever thought before to be around them when they did it. It was why he was sitting here lounging in the corner to eavesdrop on the pathetic idiots who thought themselves too important to get their hands dirty with their lower ranked disciples instead of out with the disciples he had brought. While it would have been more fun if A-Xian or Wen Ning would have been able to make it, A-Xian had begged off due to something to do with the Jiangs and Wen Ning had been needed by Wen Qing as it was time to harvest some particularly tricky medical herbs.

He'd known he wouldn't be bored enough to piss off Wen Qing by forcing the issue, and his father for some reason beyond his understanding was still allowing the Jiang to believe they had any claim over A-Xian.

Idiots like the Jiang and the morons around him should know better but that was one of the reasons they would all bow or burn.

Father had made it obvious that A-Xian was his, and thus Wen Xu's as well.

Not only had he ordered regular visits these last seven months, but he insisted that Wei Wuxian accompany him to intersect events nearly as often as Wen Xu or Wen Qing. Even if the young master did not attend an event, father would spark a thousand rumors by bringing him up in conversations constantly. Wen Xu didn't understand why it bothered them, aside from cultivation and the occasional interesting night hunt, A-Xian was the best topic to discuss ever.

Everytime the Wen brought up all his accomplishments, their audience had to bite their tongues behind smiles clenched so hard he felt astonished they could talk after, especially if any Jiang or Lan were around.

They should be nicer, he mused, as he listened to the self important white clad old man from the Lan Clan, Shenzhen or something, he hadn't paid much attention after determining he wasn't one of the clan members his father had been concerned about lately. He didn't know why they had been developing strategies beyond just burning Cloud Recesses or the Jiang down, but Father knew what he was doing, and nothing they had developed was anything Wen Xu couldn't accomplish.

Perhaps it was because A-Xian seemed to care about collateral damage. Wen Xu was trying to be better at not just burning everything to blood and ash when things annoyed him because it upset A-Xian, even if he tried to hide it. Seeing his grin go tight and his attitude become slightly manic as he tried to pretend to be happy when he should be happy, was...

Wen Xu didn't know.



But it made his chest hurt like the few times Wen Xu had not been able to meet his father's expectations and he didn't like it.

A-Xian should always be happy, and these pigs should understand that.

They shouldn't be whining about father booking out nearly every renowned craftsman and tradesman for commissions. Father wanted to, and A-Xian deserved it, and so did Wen Ning, who had sharply risen in favor since A-Xian had demonstrated how Wen Chao was more of an incompetent, showboating, led by his dick, fuckup than Wen Xu thought.

Wen Ning had much more talent than he would have ever imagined. His personality was still too soft, much like A-Xian. He'd thought that after his real skills had been recognized, he would gain confidence and take his rightful place as a Wen, but the boy remained meek and hesitant. He was still a thousand times better company than he'd previously thought, more so compared to Wen Chao or the sons of Father's people that he used to alleviate his boredom most often.

He'd tried several things to get the boy to relax, and while they worked to a degree, Wen Ning still hadn't settled into his own skin. He'd done what he always did when he ran into an issue and asked his father, who had looked at him consideringly for a while before waving his secretaries out of his office. They'd sat at the table, sharing tea as Father explained that thanks to Wen Chao and the harassment of his fellow thugs, Wen Ning would likely never have confidence outside of certain situations. Same with the way A-Xian had been treated by the Jiang meant that he'd always need more assurance of his worth.

The conversation he had had with his father opened his eyes to a new reality.

"Xu-er, in this life, the experiences one has as a child defines them. You can take steps to mitigate the behaviors they cause, but they will never disappear completely." Father had explained as he sipped his tea. "I taught you to recognize your shortcomings or mistakes and work to correct them. My shortcoming was thinking that as my son, Wen Chao would at least not be stupid enough to damage our Sect. I made a mistake giving Wen Chao as much freedom as I did. And as any mistake a Sect Leader makes, it had an impact on our Sect."

"Father yo--"

Wen Ruohan had raised a hand, cutting him off. "No, I did. Now I am correcting that, but it will take time, and like all mistakes, it may not be enough to undo the damage to Wen Ning or any of the other disciples that Wen Chao's petty jealousy did. They lost trust that they would be treated according to their merits, and be secure in growing their talents to the best heights they could."

Father had met his eyes then, something far more open than he thought he'd ever seen on his Father's face. "A sect needs to be balanced to run well. There needs to be clear lines drawn. While your people should fear your wrath, they also need to trust that you will make the right decisions. If you lose that trust so only fear remains, you can no longer trust them to heed your orders without a whip at their back. It takes far more effort and resources than just having them obey you."

“But you are the sect leader. You are Wen Ruohan. That should be enough.”

Wen Ruohan smiled, “I am. But no matter how great I am, I cannot be everywhere at once. Neither can you, when you one day act as my proxy.”

Wen Xu had frozen in his seat. He had never wanted to take over from his Father. Wen Ruohan was absolute, and just shy of immortal. Why would Wen Xu want to deal with all the hassle Father did unless the man ordered it.

There could be no one but Father sitting on the Obsidian Throne of the Nightless City.

“Xu-er, once we have reminded the cultivation world of where they belong, I fully intend to spend quite a bit of time completing the research I put off. You will lead in my place.”

For probably the first time in his life, Wen Xu had felt something akin to fear. He still did, when he thought of it. That day though, it had been a new feeling. An overwhelming feeling.

“I recognize, and you should as well, that you do not have the capability to earn the trust needed in the other commanders of our Sect.” Wen Xu bowed his head, fighting... something. Something burned inside him at that. He was better than Chao-er, he would not be so pathetic as to not do what Father needed him to for the sect. “Luckily, you have already taken steps to mitigate that.”

Wen Xu’s head had flown up, and Father had actually laughed. Wen Xu tried to think over everything he had done, trying to think of something that had changed, and then it hit him. “A-Xian.”

Father had nodded, his smile growing wider, and Wen Xu felt the burning sensation disappear. “Yes. He is the perfect right hand for you. One that will not allow something like what Wen Chao did to ever happen again.” Wen Xu nodded. Father, as always, was right the more he considered it. It honestly felt relieving. He hated having to pretend to care about the asinine things that some of the others did. It was boring, useless, and frustrating. Having A-Xian there to do so instead was perfect. He’d keep track of birthdays, when someone needed reassurance or to be rewarded, when he needed to get involved in arguments between idiots that he didn’t really care about before they could become an issue.

“He will serve you well in taking care of the sect, but he is kind. People will hurt him, disregard him, and use him as the Jiang do, and he will allow them as it is all he has known if he is not protected, which you will do as perfectly as everything else you put your mind to.” Wen Xu grinned, yes. Yes he could more than certainly protect A-Xian. It would be quite enjoyable, actually.

“As for Wen Qionglin,” Father stated. “He will serve you well, for much the same reason as Wei Wuxian. Through my mistake of letting Wen Chao have too much freedom, I have damaged Wen Qionglin’s trust in me, as I have many of my Sect.” Wen Xu nodded, once more wishing that Father had let him help make Wen Chao pay for his hubris. “I will seek to fix my mistake, but once trust is lost, it is a hard thing to regain. The steps you have taken have caused him to begin trusting you, just as Wei Wuxian is slowly beginning to trust us.

Those two will help you not repeat my mistake, just as you will not allow their shortcomings to harm them.”

Wen Xu smiled at the memory, at the truth he had learned that day.

A truth that helped him to hold his rage at the words being bandied about him as his father had been doing, even if he didn't quite know why they were holding back.

His Father had a plan for A-Xian to take his place at Wen Xu's side.

Wen Xu had never seen a point of going against his Father, and never would.

XxXxX

Meng Yao wouldn't say he hated the Jin in general, but he was certainly working up to it. Even though some part of Meng Yao still wanted to be accepted here in Lanling, the home of his ancestors, he had seen enough of it to know that almost the whole lot were even more atrocious than the worst of the puffed up, worthless, demanding, cruel customers that came to the brothel.

Each time Meng Yao accompanied the Wens to Koi Tower, the Jin would grudgingly accept his presence, though it had started a fight between Jin Guangshan and Madam Jin each time. Wen Ruohan and Wen Xu would watch, smugly amused at each argument, while Wei Wuxian would follow Meng Yao's half-brother's lead and bolt away to do almost anything other than to be in the same room. Unlike the Jin heir however, Wei Wuxian at least made sure to get as many other people out with him as he could.

Those fights generally set the tone for the rest of the visit.

Even with Wen Ruohan's clear favoritism of Wei Wuxian and his position as the First Disciple of the Jiang, arrogant fools like Jin Zixun and his cronies still insulted him to his face nearly every time they came across him, thinking that lineage was all that mattered. They treated him just as poorly as they treated Meng Yao. They didn't see others as human unless they were of similar status.

They were both wrong and right. All people were human, but lineage and who your parents were mattered in ways these idiots didn't have the sense to recognize for all they aped like they did.

The world just worked that way.

But every now and then there would be someone that could rise above the fate dictated by their birth, and anyone with an ounce of common sense treated them no differently than other peers, even if they weren't actually smart enough to treat those of lower social classes well.

Wei Wuxian normally just smiled and bore their comments with the same type of practiced ease the whores Meng Yao had learned from. Sometimes if needed he would shoot back insults until he could get away, but one time...

It had been late, almost dusk, and they'd been in one of the gardens that surrounded Koi Tower sitting next to a small pond as Meng Yao attempted to salvage Wei Wuxian's outer robe from where someone had "accidentally" spilled a particularly greasy dish on it while the Young Master carefully worked on picking the bits of sauce from the rivets on his belt. Wen Ruohan had been in a private meeting with Jin Guangshan and several other sect leaders, which was probably the only reason they'd done something so blatant.

Jin Zixun and his little thugs had cornered them, stinking of wine and taunting Wei Wuxian as nothing more than the son of a servant who bent over for anyone in power to further his own ambitions. Asked him what it'd take to bend over for them, and if Meng Yao would be any cheaper since he was the son of a whore and would probably enjoy it.

Meng Yao had barely been able to grab onto Wei Wuxian and pull him back from punching Jin Zixun. They'd all laughed, saying that Wei Wuxian was too stupid to learn better manners from the Wens than he did from the Jiangs if he thought he could get away with attacking his betters. Being expelled from the Cloud Recesses apparently hadn't taught him that there were consequences from biting the hand that fed you.

Wei Wuxian had let Meng Yao lead him away, saying something about his clothes being a loss, the Jins jeers echoing behind them.

When Meng Yao had reported the incident to Wen Ruohan after their return home, the man had snapped the brush in his hand. That night screams from the Inferno Palace echoed through the entire city, rattling bones, chilling souls, and causing fervent prayers to the gods.

While he could not see it yet, Meng Yao knew Wen Ruohan had a reason to hold back when it came to making the Jins pay for their insults.

Retribution would come, and Meng Yao found something dark within himself that crowed with satisfaction that the punishment would be that much worse for the delay.

In the meantime though, he worked to ensure Wei Wuxian would never be left alone with the Jin again. That either Wen Ruohan, Wen Xu, or Wen Qing would always be at his side.

XxXxX

"Well?" Wen Ruohan glared down at the pathetic fool that had decided to wait to burn some bodies and thus brought his entire team down with corpse poisoning, topped off by only barely getting a damn flare off. If Wen Zhuliu hadn't been traveling through a nearby town on his way back from escorting Lady Zhao Jiaying to her father's command post, it would have been even more of an utter disaster.

The dispatched team should have easily been able to resolve the simple issue with a pair of vicious ghosts resulting from a dispute over land rights in a town that produced the wine that his son favored, and his grandson called the third best wine he had ever tasted after Emperor's Smile and the lotus seed wine his shijie brewed. The fact that the request came from the owner of the winery with a gift of a rare vintage he could present to the boys was the only damn reason Wen Ruohan took an interest in the issue and assigned someone to deal with it personally.

Which, frankly, irritated him further as it reminded him that he still couldn't find the price it would take to convince one of the brewers of Emperor's Smile to move to Wen territory and set up a winery. What rankled the worst though is that his polite overture to Lan Qiren about what might interest the wine masters, which he had been planning to segue into further enquiries about his younger nephew, had been completely rebuffed by the cantankerous fool. He knew that the Lan "didn't drink " so they wouldn't have first hand knowledge of the matter, but Emperor's Smile ranked among Gusu's most famous goods. He'd have figured the Lan would maintain some type of relationship with the brewers but no, that'd make sense, and the Lans' had their heads so high up in the clouds it rivaled their damn mountain.

"I be- I beg you f-f-f-for mercy! Please Sect Leader! I did not want to risk the flames spreading in the dark!"

Wen Ruohan's hands convulsed around the smooth obsidian stone of his throne, only the many spells and workings added to the ancestral seat by generations of his ancestors keeping it from shattering in his grip.

"You pathetic, stupid as-"

The doors to his throne room burst open with a loud clang, and Wen Ruohan snapped his gaze from the shivering, stinking of piss mistake of humanity at his feet, building the qi behind his eyes to eradicate the damn fools that dared to interrupt him while having the absolute gall to disrespect his palace, only to freeze and actually gape at the picture presented to him.

Xu-er, Wei Wuxian, and Wen Qionglin were, well, it would be charitable to call it standing in the doorway. From how shaky they were and the white knuckles of their grips on each other, if any of them let go, they'd all topple to the floor from the disruption to their carefully balanced tension. They were all bloody, roughed up, smudged with dirt, slime, and who knows what, and stunk so terribly that Wen Ruohan could smell them from his throne.

The three looked almost ecstatic if fairly exhausted from whatever fight they had just completed, but had their swords at their sides, and were fully kitted out in knives and talisman pouches, though Wen Qionglin's bow didn't seem to be on his back even though his quiver peeked over his shoulder.

The three also all wore the new embroidered protective robes Wei Wuxian thought of two visits ago that Wen Ruohan had crafted as a surprise since it'd been the ten month anniversary of finding his grandson.

His stomach decided to twist as he realized the three had probably just done a damn field test of the things.

Given the normal level of talismans and spiritual protections woven into good quality cultivator robes, Wei Wuxian's revamped and improved designs should've been able to handle anything short of a higher demon. Wen Ruohan tested the things himself by putting one on a training dummy and practicing strike forms on it followed by several qi blasts. He knew what type of force it took to damage the things. All three boys looked worse than the dummy had except for the fact that they still retained their heads.

Wen Ruohan took a deep breath, getting ready to perfectly calmly ask what the FUCK they had just done, when what he could only describe as a a tortoise boulder was floated up over the top of the stairs. He didn't recognize the glowing talismans covering the gargantuan shell so they were probably one of Wei Wuxian's off-the-cuff inventions. Meng Yao, Wen Xu's assistant Jia Enlai, and one of the interchangeable cultivators that followed Wen Xu around when he felt like company were riding the thing, apparently guiding it while almost a full squad of his frontline cultivators kept it tethered with his grandson's clever little spiritual ropes. The rest of the squad came up behind them with several other items laid out like grand trophies on trays that were so simplistic they'd probably been haphazardly grabbed from the gatehouse on their way in.

It didn't take him long to place the legend that the enormous carcass belonged to.

"You three killed the Xuanwu of Slaughter," was the only thing that he could think to say.

The room went silent except for the whimpers of the trash he'd been in the middle of sentencing.

Wen Ruohan grinned, flicking off qi to throw the fool out his way to a couple of guards to drag to a prison cell to deal with later. He rose from his throne and strode towards his boys. His son and grandson, and a cousin that he was starting to be proud of.

He stood in front of the three, looking them over more closely. They really did need to see Wen Qing, who'd better have already been called for.

Still they were... happy. He didn't think he'd ever seen Wen Xu so content. Wei Wuxian for once held no apprehension in his eyes. Even Wen Qionglin didn't seem as skittish.

He smiled warmly. "Well done."

Xu-er smirked proudly, holding his head high while Wen Qionglin tried to duck behind Xu-er only to almost destabilize the precariously upright trio, and Wei Wuxian threw his head back and laughed.

It rang like beautiful music, chasing shadows from its path, freer than any sound he'd ever heard.

XxXxX

Meng Yao sat with Deng Changming, Tang Heng, Guo Ai, Ren Xiaoli, and Liang Bingwen at the table in Wei Wuxian's main living area. While as servants they would normally never dare to sit at their master's table, Wei Wuxian handled matters unusually and had long since given them permission to use his rooms after finding them all scrunched into the small service space a floor down as they planned for one of their young master's night hunts. They made sure to not abuse the privilege, much to Wei Wuxian's exasperation as he considered it horrid they would be uncomfortable when he had so much space.

Meng Yao managed to talk him into a slight understanding by comparing it to if he or Jiang Fengmian found a servant presumptuous enough to do their work in Jiang Cheng or Jiang

Yanli's rooms. Wei Wuxian conceded the point, however he'd still argued that he was nowhere near as important as those two so it really couldn't be the same.

While he didn't disabuse him of his misunderstandings, Meng Yao disagreed. He had yet to figure out why Wen Ruohan cared so much for Wei Wuxian, however he could tell that the affection was real. The most terrifying man in the entire cultivation world loved Wei Wuxian as much as a man like that could. Despite rumors, Meng Yao felt quite certain that Wen Ruohan didn't want to fuck him or anything of the sort. Meng Yao knew what lust looked like, and Wen Ruohan hadn't directed anything even remotely related to it at the effervescent, brilliant young man.

They might be related somehow, but Meng Yao had found no connections between Wei Changze and the Wens, and Cangse Sanren was an orphan from Baoshan Sanren's mountain.

He might just be intrigued by Wei Wuxian's genius and want to bring him into the Wen Sect, but even that didn't quite make sense. If that had been the case, Wen Ruohan would have likely made some type of offer already, and he would have brought him into a branch family like he did with Core Melting Hand or the others whose talents caught his eye. Wei Wuxian would also not have been outfitted like a young master of the main Wen family or given a household in the heart of the Wen family rooms as if he were an heir in good standing like Wen Xu.

From what he could tell, Wen Ruohan indulged Wei Wuxian and favored him above all others.

And given the absolute upheavals that Wei Wuxian had unintentionally caused without any word of censure from the terrifying Sect Leader, Meng Yao doubted Wei Wuxian could do anything that would ever disappoint Wen Ruohan or cause him to lose favor.

A part of him deep down wished his own father would love him like that, be proud of him and acknowledge his talents and worth. Fortunately or not, that part got smaller and smaller every day that he spent around the example of unconditional care, selflessness, and righteousness that was Wei Wuxian.

Wei Wuxian who made sure that Meng Yao's mother received the type of burial she deserved, with incense, paper money, and mourners.

Who commissioned a painting of his mother from no less than the young master of the Nie Sect to hang above the plaque Meng Yao finally had so he could bow and make offerings at for no other reason than he did not wish Meng Yao to forget his mother's face the way he had forgotten his own.

Who ensured that Meng Yao got credit for everything he did.

Who gave Meng Yao free rein to actually help people.

Who somehow convinced Wen Ruohan of all people to do things like increase official food distribution to street children, create medical halls, and set up communication and martial

processes to help common people in the places that cultivators and anyone part of higher society normally ignored.

Who had started plans for a school for common children to not just learn additional trades and skills to help their families, but to also educate them on the things that might harm them and see if there were any children with the potential to become cultivators.

Everything that would, in any normal world, infuriate Wen Ruohan as much as it did the more traditional of his advisors. Instead he smiled indulgently and arranged for his staff to reallocate their budget.

As those instances hadn't caused Wei Wuxian to lose favor, Meng Yao calculated the chances of Wei Wuxian enraging Wen Ruohan to the point Wen Chao did as nearly infinitesimal. That didn't mean they were none, though. And while Wen Ruohan didn't seem fickle enough to just stop supporting Wei Wuxian's endeavors without cause, Meng Yao hated leaving things up to chance.

And Meng Yao cared for Wei Wuxian.

That meant that he needed to do everything possible to not just keep Wei Wuxian happy as Wen Ruohan ordered, but do what he could to keep both Wei Wuxian and himself in Wen Ruohan's good graces.

Fortunately Wei Wuxian made that very, very easy.

Still that was no reason to be sloppy or reactive. Hence, planning sessions where he could ensure that every detail of everything would be perfect, especially for large events like the discussion conference hosted by the Lanling Jin in two weeks. Wen Ruohan had rather neatly pressured Jin Guangshan into turning it into much more of a family event than discussion conferences usually were. All the Sect Leaders, their spouses, and children would be in attendance, whereas it usually would be optional for all but the sect leader.

Meng Yao could understand the reasoning as there had been a vast improvement in the Wen cultivators since Wei Wuxian had exposed Wen Chao's indiscretions. It'd cement the idea of their growing strength if they made a particularly good showing in front of a larger audience than usual, especially as additional types of competitions were scheduled this time.

That reason however sat somewhat ill with him. He knew there had to be something more that Sect Leader Wen wanted to accomplish, but he couldn't quite figure it out yet.

"Will Young Master Wei be competing in both the calligraphy and the talisman events?" Tang Heng asked him, carefully sorting through the young master's brushes and various inks, selecting which ones to pack. While Wei Wuxian would need to use the ones provided by the Jins in actual competition, he should have the best available outside of that. And Wei Wuxian would undoubtedly use more supplies if he wished to practice, which he tended to do late at night when no one was watching and his mind spiraled too fast to get his ideas out, which Meng Yao could relate to more than a little.



“Talisman, yes, though the calligraphy event is opposite the little ones’ sword racing, so he will be going to cheer them on instead,” Meng Yao replied.

Ren Xiaoli smiled brightly as he finished reviewing the results of the lineage exam they conducted to refresh the students' knowledge of the important individuals that would be there. It wouldn't do for one of Wei Wuxian's personal students to commit a social gaff, even if Meng Yao felt certain the children would be among the top of the ranks for practical skills. “All the kids are so excited to show the Young Master how much they have been practicing.”

Meng Yao smiled as well, he had gotten in quite a bit of flight practice himself helping Ren Xiaoli and Liang Bingwen pace the children in case they fell.

“If the bitch lets him,” Deng Changming hissed, almost tossing down the lists of formal events and corresponding attire he and Guo Ai'd been going over. If they sat in any other room than the one Wei Wuxian had personally warded for privacy, and in any other company, Meng Yao would have glared disapprovingly at Madam Yu being described as such, but all of them including Su Meng, Fu Gang, and Luo Xiuying who were currently coordinating with Wen Ruohan, Wen Xu, and Wen Qing's servants, hated the woman.

In between what Meng Yao had observed, what Wei Wuxian let slip even if he pretended to be joking, and the intelligence reports he had gone through with a fine toothed comb, Meng Yao perhaps despised her the most out of anyone but Deng Changming. The normally extremely professional servant, who had been born and raised in the service of the Wens, gained a particularly dark glint in his eyes whenever even a hint of the woman came up in a conversation.

It likely tied into the reason that Deng Changming and only Deng Changming could be in the rooms when the young master bathed, something the man was nearly fanatical about. Meng Yao winced as his arm felt a phantom ache from when Deng Changming had dragged him out of the young master's room the first visit he'd been officially assigned as Wei Wuxian's assistant. He'd been told that no one could be near the bathing room when the young master was in them, but had thought that staying in the main chamber and waiting to help him into his outer robes would be enough.

Deng Changming quickly clarified the matter with an unusual seriousness, and no matter what Meng Yao tried he refused to divulge the reason. Not that the reason entirely mattered, that a reason existed was all Meng Yao cared about.

The distasteful Madam would be in attendance at the Discussion Conference and they'd be unable to ensure she stayed away from Wei Wuxian as the young master would be attending not as Wen Ruohan's guest, but as the Head Disciple of Yunmeng Jiang.

However Wen Ruohan ordered that Wei Wuxian still be roomed by him for the event, and that he be accorded the same considerations as when he visited at his side, which meant that Meng Yao would be accompanying him.

As unenthused as he felt to be returning to Koi Tower yet again, he would also be having to learn the Jiangs while trying to placate them for his mere presence as it seemed certain that it'd incise them. Meng Yao had yet to have the dubious pleasure of meeting any of them, but

based on reports of their tempers he wouldn't have chosen a stressful environment in which he'd already be on the defensive to do so.

Still, he did feel a sort of dark glee at finally being able to properly begin dealing with the Jiang no matter how stressful it would be.

To his consternation, it'd taken him quite some time to figure out the reason Wen Ruohan hadn't already sent him to attend Wei Wuxian while with the Jiang like he did everywhere else.

After all, Wen Ruohan found it highly amusing to have Meng Yao accompany Wei Wuxian on their trips to Koi Tower just to see Jin Guangshan squirm under the raging glare of his wife, which the now almost gone part of him that wanted the man to recognize him as his son and love him balked at. Given the closeness of the two madams, and how often Sect Leader Jiang visited Koi Tower for the same business that brought Wen Ruohan, Wei Wuxian accompanying him along with his heir at the Chief Cultivator's commend, it couldn't be a coincidence that Meng Yao had barely even seen them.

It had been on Wei Wuxian's last visit to the Nightless City that Meng Yao finally understood why, with everything else he did, Wen Ruohan didn't interfere with the Jiang aside from the occasional pointed letter to Jiang Fengmian to keep his wife in line. Why he had a glint in his eye like a well fed housecat toying with a mouse for fun right before biting a leg off and leaving it to bleed out whenever the Jiangs were mentioned. Why he allowed Wei Wuxian to return to a place that did not treat him as he deserved.

It shamed him, in fact, that it took him nearly a year to see the beautiful simplicity of the masterwork Wen Ruohan crafted. Wei Wuxian, who with each visit got progressively more inebriated each final night before he left back to the Jiangs, had quite unusually gotten drunk enough that he'd retired to his rooms earlier than usual with Young Master Wen's assistance. The assistance which had turned into carrying Wei Wuxian's unconscious body about halfway there.

Meng Yao had been carefully removing the Young Master's sharp hair ornaments after handing his heavily embroidered overrobe to Deng Changmei and Guo Ai to check over and put away while Su Meng wrapped his boots to take for cleaning as Tang Heng ensured a carafe of water and sweet snacks sat in easy reach. If he took longer than needed to ensure none of the dark strands that started to wave as the evening wore on despite their careful application of oil earlier got caught in the tines or points, ran his fingers a few extra times through Wei Wuxian's thick, wonderfully soft hair before starting to comb it out so it could be braided for sleep, no one noticed.

To his shock Wei Wuxian had caught his hand as he moved away from putting his head carefully on his ceramic pillow. He'd looked up at him dazedly, an odd pout on his face quite different from the overly dramatic, playful ones he gave during the day. "A-Yao?"

"Yes, A-Xian, it's just me," Meng Yao smiled down at him.

Wei Wuxian blinked slowly, looking a little lost, before reaching up towards his hair with his perfect, long, elegant fingers, touching the strands briefly before trying and failing to focus

on Meng Yao again.

“Di yu fix my hair?” He half-mumbled, before wiggling his toes and making a good attempt at being startled given his drunken state. “A-Yao! Ma shoes go stoled!” Meng Yao decidedly did not laugh as he smiled down at Wei Wuxian, though the others still in the room made various choking noises as they held back their own mirth.

If asked, Meng Yao would state that he hadn’t known why he decided to tease Wei Wuxian, it certainly couldn’t be because he thought Wei Wuxian looked adorable as flustered as he was, a slight flush of alcohol on his cheeks with his eyes trying to focus. “Oh no! How horrible!” Wei Wuxian gave another whine that he probably thought was an agreement but actually sounded like a kitten mewling for its mother, and they all had to bite back more laughter. “What luck, I have found the shoes and their thief, Su Meng! However should we punish such a servant?”

Wei Wuxian whimpered, grabbing him, what Meng Yao could only call terror covering his face. “No, no I los ‘em. Su Meng wound’t take ‘em! Whip me inste!”

The mirth was sucked from the room like a tide being pulled back before a tidal wave.

It took Meng Yao a few tries to speak as Wei Wuxian grasped fitfully at him. “There will be no whippings, A-Xian.”

“No whip?”

“Yes, you said you lost them, I believe you. And accidentally misplacing something so minor for such a short while isn’t something to punish you over.”

Wei Wuxian’s eyes softened, and his mouth dropped open. “Bu I-”

Meng Yao rather impertinently placed his fingers on Wei Wuxian’s lips, which were just as soft as they looked. “Everything is alright, A-Xian, you have done nothing wrong.” A heart wrenching vulnerability painted over Wei Wuxian’s features, his eyes shimmering with tears as his lips trembled ever so lightly beneath Meng Yao’s fingers. “It is time to sleep now, and I will be here the entire time to make sure there will be no whippings, no punishments. In the morning, everything will still be alright.” The tears gathering in his eyes dripped down his cheeks. “You are safe here in Wen Ruohan’s protection.”

Wei Wuxian sobbed, curling up to clutch onto Meng Yao desperately, the noises that came from him were almost howls as what had to be years of buried emotions forced their way out of him against his will.

Meng Yao could only hold him tightly, patting him softly and murmuring the platitudes his Mother whispered to him to calm his nightmares. He’d barely glanced up as a large hand landed on his shoulder, carefully shifting Wei Wuxian into Wen Ruohan’s arms.

Meng Yao had not been able to go far as Wei Wuxian refused to relinquish his arm, but he managed to move far enough away that Wen Xu could sit awkwardly by his father. He looked absolutely lost, unsure where to put his hands or what he could do. Meng Yao caught his

attention and mimed the petting motion to him, and Wen Xu tentatively, almost fearfully, barely brushed Wei Wuxian's hair. Wei Wuxian's head, cradled in the nook of Wen Ruohan's arm, tilted ever so slightly into the touch. Wen Xu gathered himself determinedly and ran his fingers more assuredly through Wei Wuxian's hair, obviously grateful that there was something he could do.

Meng Yao looked over just to make sure, and the rest of the servants had left, the glow of Wei Wuxian's privacy wards active.

Wei Wuxian had cried himself to sleep ensconced in Wen Ruohan's arms.

Wen Ruohan had beamed. His smile stretched from ear to ear showing teeth that gleamed bright and dangerous in the soft lamplight. Meng Yao realized that this... This was what victory looked like.

Wei Wuxian trusting him.

Relying on him.

Using Wen Ruohan as an anchor and shield both. The world had broken pieces off of Wei Wuxian with its cruelties, and Wen Ruohan was now here to help him put himself back together. He could carefully shift things so that Wei Wuxian would be whole and happy but with a part of him that would always belong just to him.

That night Meng Yao recognized the true power of Wen Ruohan's patience, of the true heart of his mother's lessons in guiding people to take an action you wanted without forcing them, which had been one of the key reasons for her success in her youth.

By allowing the Jiangs to continue to escalate without his intervention, he showed Wei Wuxian their true nature, for Wen Ruohan hadn't done anything but ask for his time.

By letting the Jins grow overconfident in their arrogant insults, he showed Wei Wuxian that the other sects were the same, and only Wen Ruohan's presence would stop them.

By arranging things at the Nightless City so carefully, he showed Wei Wuxian that he could have a home there, and Wen Ruohan would always welcome him.

Meng Yao knew in the deep, dark part of him that only grew as he took more steps down the path Wen Ruohan was guiding him on that he was likely the same in a way. As long as he could protect the few things that were good and right in this world he didn't mind tying up his sleeves and drenching his hands with bloody mud to tear apart his enemies piece by painful piece.

He shook his head to clear himself from the memory, smiling at Deng Changming. "I am quite sure that Sect Leader Wen will ensure that Madam Yu is not allowed to interfere with the Young Master's plans."

She had outlived her usefulness, after all, and she had many transgressions to bleed for.

XxXxX

Jiang Yanli stopped short as she spotted Wen Ruohan looking around the gardens of Koi Tower. While this wasn't the first time she'd met the man, it'd always been at a distance before. This close, the man did not look nearly as horrible as one would imagine him to be based on the tales told of him. After all, villains in the stories told to children were always ugly even if they hid that ugliness with clever tricks, and as everyone said in hushed whispers through carefully phrased insinuations, Wen Ruohan was a villain that threatened to burn the cultivation world to ashes.

In fact, she thought as she took him in, Wen Ruohan looked almost like a hero from the stories. He stood tall and sure, his clothes impeccably spoke of his station without being gaudy, his hair neatly perfect in a guan that glinted in the sun to crown him with light. He seemed every inch a noble cultivator just shy of immortality, power evident in every action, ready to do the right thing against any odds.

Perhaps that is what makes him so dangerous, she mused.

Even without every rumor that reached their ears about the horrors Wen Ruohan committed, Jiang Yanli knew they had a personal reason to fear the man before her.

The way that he had looked at their family as they had bowed in greeting to him at top of Koi Tower after arriving in suspiciously close timing shook her to her soul. She had sensed A-Cheng tensing up next to her, though he likely didn't know why. He'd never been as good at reading people as her, and she knew the look that crossed Wen Ruohan's face for an infinitesimal moment before it had been buried under bland politeness and assured confidence.

That look... It was Mother at her coldest, cruelest, sharpest rage.

It was the harbinger of pain and exhaustion and bitter fear.

Luckily Mother had been spending most of her time with Madam Jin as she performed as an ever gracious hostess, greeting guests at her side and helping with the inevitable problems that would arise from hosting an event of this size.

Jiang Yanli had never thought to see this many cultivators from so many different sects in one place. Most of the smaller sects weren't normally invited to discussion conferences or were unable to attend even if they had been, as the expected party size for a discussion conference could strain their resources and possibly even open holes in their defenses at home. For this one however, there were so many guests that they'd filled Koi Towers' many guest rooms and booked out nearly every hotel and inn in the surrounding city. She'd been told that some sects had even had to set up camps at the edges of Jin property or the outskirts of the city. Training and staging grounds were at a premium, causing tempers to flare as disciples jockeyed for space to practice last minute and check their gear for the events.

All of this commotion was due to the man before her, according to Jin Guangshan. The Jin sect leader had stopped to spend the night at Lotus Pier and commiserate with Father about having to deal with stretching their disciples thin to help cover territory for the smaller sects so that they could attend. Though the invites had been sent from the Lanling Jin as appropriate, it had included the rather unusual request to bring their spouses and children in

order to promote more friendships between the sects and reduce some of the recent tensions. He'd explained that it had been added at Wen Ruohan's demand, though the Chief Cultivator would not explain why.

It certainly explained the pressure that Wen Ruohan had put on everyone to follow that request, clearly implying that it was less of a request and more of a demand.

Father and Mother both had been aghast, Mother raging that the man would dare order the other great sects around, pointing out bluntly that Wen Ruohan was the reason for all the recent tensions in the first place.

Father had only sighed and sipped his wine as his wife and fellow sect leader fought. Jiang Yanli had been glad to see the back of him as he left the next morning. She considered it one of the benefits of her broken engagement that she would not have to live in the same building as the man.

Despite many people's mostly unspoken but obvious worries that Wen Ruohan would use this opportunity to harass their homes, they had really had no way to avoid attending without offense once the man had thrown his wholehearted support behind the Jins' "idea". He'd be bringing his own son and heir even though he had long since passed the age to compete in the accompanying games.

Jiang Yanli knew a bigger game was at play here than she could understand.

She'd learned how to manage a sect and cooperate with their neighbors as needed by her parents' side. While she could handle logistics, work schedules, and all the minutiae of making sure people were fed, housed, geared, and happy with ease, it wasn't enough. She could host guests and arrange perfect seating charts, remember birthdays, special occasions, and sad occasions and know the best gifts for everyone, and in most cases the right words.

But no matter how hard she practiced politics escaped her. She far too often assumed that people were working with the same good intentions she did, and was always surprised and flustered when they weren't. She felt uncomfortable in a crowd, falling back on practiced phrases that rang hollow. She couldn't command the attention of a room with merely a glance the way Mother and Madam Jin could.

In the end, she would never be the daughter Mother wanted. The fierce, proud, and exceptional daughter that would make the Yu proud.

Jiang Yanli was too kind.

But she did have her strengths, even if they were not ones most people looked for. Her own ways of being just as ruthless as her mother if it were needed for the happiness of those she cared about. And she would do anything to protect and support her brothers to the best of her poor ability.

Jiang Yangli could be a bit selfish in that way.

She took a deep breath, circulating her qi and grounding herself before moving forward, waving her maids off.

“Greetings Sect Leader Wen,” she called out, bowing to the man once she got close enough.

“Lady Jiang,” the man inclined his head in acknowledgement, turning an assessing gaze to her. Jiang Yanli smiled as sweetly as she could. “Have you seen Wei Wuxian?”

Jiang Yanli nodded, bowing again lightly. “This one is on her way to see him after a walk through the garden, and would not mind the company if you wished to join her.”

The man blinked, obviously surprised. She wondered idly how many people actually offered to spend time with him doing something as simple as enjoying nature. “Of course.” He politely offered her his arm, leaving it up to her whether they would merely walk side by side or if he would escort her. Jiang Yanli placed her hand on his arm and set a measured pace in the direction of the gardens she’d seen her brothers disappear into earlier.

Luckily these gardens had many curving, delicate paths that she could lead them down to adjust the amount of time her walk would take.

“It is a lovely day, isn’t it?” She asked lightly.

“Mmh,” Wen Ruohan nodded.

“A-Xian could never be inside on days like this unless Mother or Father insisted, neither could most of our shidis. We had to move so many classes out to the river!” She gave a polite giggle, and Wen Ruohan gave a small smile, though she noted the way he seemed genuinely interested in her words about A-Xian.

“I think changing up the environment when one is learning can be beneficial,” Wen Ruohan stated.

“I quite agree!” Jiang Yanli smiled. “Why, just look at A-Xian! Spending so much time in Nightless City has let him excel so much with his talisman work. He’s been so thrilled!”

“I’m glad,” the man sounded like he actually was glad, a warm tone in his voice that encouraged her to be a bit bolder.

She firmed up her grip on his arm, guiding him towards one of the longer paths winding around several plum blossom trees. He showed no hesitation as he followed her subtle lead.

“I am glad,” she said, “of the kindness you show him.”

“It is only what he deserves.”

“It is,” she stated. “But people often prefer cruelties to kindness, even with those close to them.”

Wen Ruohan made a considering sound. “Sometimes one must be cruel to be kind. Especially with those close to you. If you allow the closeness to cloud your judgment, you can be kind

when you should not and people will take advantage.”

Jiang Yanli nodded, “Too much kindness directed at those unworthy of it can allow many trespasses. But being kind to someone who is worthy that has only known cruelty can bring about wonders.”

“Wise words, Lady Jiang. It is something I have seen in practice many times before.”

“Yes, your kindness to those whose skills have gone unappreciated, like Wen Zhuliu, is well known.” She smiled up at him. “Few these days remember that sects are made better not just by passing down old blood and skills, but bringing new ones in to strengthen the line.”

Wen Ruohan let out a little chuckle. “My sentiments exactly. Too many these days are complacent, and forget to strive for greater things. That they should encourage those with unique talents to strive for greater things.”

Just as she thought. “They find themselves caught up in the past or how they believe the world should be to see how it is. They let pride, jealousy, hatred, and fear blindly guide their actions to cruelty when they should be kind.” They reached the outside of the path, and Jiang Yanli paused them to watch a bird flitting through one of the plum trees. “They use their cruelty to trap and hurt those who have unique talents, especially when they are kinder to others than themselves. Who don’t know how to wield cruelty in defense of themselves the way they would others.”

They stood there for several minutes as Wen Ruohan contemplated his answer, and Jiang Yanli felt content to wait. “Then those not blinded by the past, that look to the future, should wield cruelty in their place to break them free of cages so they can fly free.”

She gave the man another smile and started leading them around the bend of the path, back towards the main path she could use to guide them to A-Xian and A-Cheng. “It is this one’s greatest wish, to be able to one day break the cages that trap those she loves the most. Unfortunately in her position, she does not have the strength, and if she did, filial duty is a consideration not to be taken lightly.”

Once again Wen Ruohan didn’t say anything for a while, and Jiang Yanli kept her eyes on the flowers around them, listening to the chirping birds and sound of gravel beneath their feet. Though he was much taller and heavier than her, his footsteps made almost no noise. Perhaps it was because of his physical skill or cultivation. Probably both.

“This one appreciates the position you find yourself in, as he has been in it before.” Yes, she would imagine so, given that Wen Ruohan had killed several family members to claim his position.

The mood had turned far too sour with that, which would not do. “This one appreciates that you’ve been able to get A-Xian to take better care of his hair and humbly asks for the secret.”

Wen Ruohan threw his head back and laughed, and her smile widened. He trailed off into chuckles, “if you will share your recipe for the pork buns he brings! I have found myself



looking forward to them nearly as much as Wei Wuxian's visits."

"If I might gain such a powerful secret for such a low price, it is one I am happy to pay!" She tilted her head, smiling brightly at him. Yes, Wen Ruohan was terrible. But she knew what she needed to now.

Wen Ruohan patted her hand, "Worrying about the happiness of those you care for is natural. Wei Wuxian worries often about your happiness, and that of your brother."

She let a bit of sadness touch her smile. "I am lucky he cares so much for A-Cheng and for me."

Jiang Yanli paused as they drew into visible range of her boys, who were quite obviously arguing over a slew of papers that looked like one of A-Xian's talisman designs.

Nie Huisang was with them, idly fanning himself as he watched. It looked like he had ditched the rather oppressive number of guards his brother had on him, given how relaxed he appeared.

What a clever little maneuver.

Not even Nie Mingjue would be able to say that the heir of Yunmeng and their First Disciple were inadequate protection, so his younger brother would likely get away with this little escapade, if just for appearances sake.

"This humble one accepts that she is not as smart or skilled as her brothers, but she cannot help but wish to protect them anyway using all the kindness and cruelty she can muster, even if the people they need protecting from are oftentimes themselves." She steeled herself as Wen Ruohan stared down at her with a gaze as gold as a cat's in the dark. She met his eyes, unafraid and resolute.

It certainly was improper that she claimed A-Xian as family without him being formally adopted.

Jiang Yanli did not care.

A daughter of a sect leader's family should never assume that she knew what her brothers needed better than they did, especially one as weak as Jiang Yanli.

Jiang Yanli would not let her brothers suffer if it was one of the few things she could help them with. If-if that meant leaning on Sect Leader Wen for A-Xian's wellbeing, advocating someone other than her parents in word or action as she consoled A-Xian at his darkest moments, she would do it.

Wen Ruohan looked deep in her eyes, face blank as a statue as he really appraised her. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, he nodded. For the first time in her life, Jiang Yanli felt truly seen.

Wen Ruohan smiled almost softly at her, and it was certainly more genuine than the previous smiles he had given her. Jiang Yanli beamed back before winking, pointing her head at her

brothers. “Shall we do something unexpected to catch their attention?”

“I was merely curious when his qi became muted so I used it as the excuse for a break,” Wen Ruohan replied. “I will leave you all to your joys and go back to dealing with the squabbling children.”

Jiang Yanli barely stopped the laughter from bursting out of her at his words, not wanting to give their position away before Wen Ruohan left.

“Well,” she grinned, “I hope that you found at least a small bit of joy in your break.”

Wen Ruohan nodded. “Far more than I anticipated. Good day, Lady Jiang.”

“Good day, Sect Leader Wen.” Jiang Yanli watched as the man strode purposefully back to the tower, waiting until he turned the corner back into the main gardens before taking another deep breath and letting the tension seep from her shoulders.

Good.

Good.

Jiang Yanli hummed lightly to herself as she wandered over to her brothers who were too busy arguing to see her. A slight shiver ran over her as she stepped through the field created by one of A-Xian’s privacy wards, which would likely explain why his spiritual energy had felt muted to Wen Ruohan. She’d need to remind them to do more situational awareness drills. Or maybe throw something at them the next time they were arguing so intently they forgot the rest of the world and all its dangers.

“It’ll cause problems!” Jiang Cheng snapped.

“What will cause problems?” she asked, grinning mischievously as the three jumped, flailing quite spectacularly and knocking Nie Huaisang to the ground. Papers and talismans scattered all around them and ink that had been jostled spilled over the bench they had been seated on.

Her brothers quickly scrambled for the talisman notes, trying to stop her from seeing them but only making more of a mess.

It didn’t help that Nie Huaisang kicked A-Cheng’s knees out from under him. “You knew these were new robes! Why did you throw me to the ground?!?”

“Who says it was me, huh!?” A-Cheng snapped, lightly kicking Nie Huaisang back. “You knocked yourself to the ground!”

Wei Wuxian had finished gathering the papers, hiding them behind his back as he grinned brightly at her.

She raised an eyebrow at the three. A-Xian gave a strained laugh as the other two quickly climbed to their feet, Nie Huaisang carefully checking his fan for damage while A-Cheng scowled adorably.

“What will cause problems?” she asked again, more serious this time. If their idea was something they didn’t want her to know about, it wouldn’t be a harmless prank.

All three shifted uncomfortably.

Jiang Yanli sighed sadly, pouting just a little. “I am just worried, there are so many people here I don’t want you two to get in trouble with.”

Her brothers crumbled. “You don’t have to worry A-Jie! Because it’s not going to happen.”

“Yeah, it’s too powerful and has a wide range. I can’t figure out how to focus the effect. It’s going right in the ‘Wei Wuxian, if you use this talisman you don’t get Shijie’s special soup for a week’ box even without you telling me to put it there!”

Nie Huaisang rolled his eyes and snapped his fan open to cover his smirk.

“What is too powerful?” She prodded.

Her brothers grimaced at each other before A-Xian guiltily pulled the papers out, offering them to her. She took them and started to glance through them. While she had no special skill with talismans or other spellwork, she’d had enough knowledge from deciphering A-Xian’s notes for him after he wrote too fast or listening to him ramble about his ideas that she could at least make out a few of the details.

“Is this related to that blood type talisman you created for Wen Qing? Except these radicals look different.”

As A-Xian was the talisman’s inventor, Yunmeng Jiang had access to it and could reproduce it for widespread use. All the healers that had been testing it were in awe. The anticipated revenue from the sales of the talismans would be a very tidy sum.

“Instead of telling blood type it- well- I mean-” A-Xian stuttered.

A-Cheng sighed, dropping his head back as if looking to the heavens for patience. “Don’t hurt yourself. A-Jie, it’s a talisman that will cause a very bright, overly showy spiritual link to appear between blood related people.”

She blinked. “You’ve created a talisman to prove parentage?”

“Not just that!” Wei Wuxian grinned sheepishly. “It’ll show everyone that you’re related to back three generations! For example, if you had a rather large amount of half siblings or half cousins nearby, it would shove it in your face!”

A-Cheng elbowed him, “yeah, except you have no restraint so it’ll hit all of Koi Tower and a good chunk of the surrounding area!”

“It’s not my fault! The way the spiritual pressure needs to-”

“I do not want to know!” A-Cheng hissed. “Because this is never going to see the light of day!”

As her brothers started bickering, Jiang Yanli let herself think. In a place like Koi Tower, that type of thing... The Jin would be furious.

They would demand retribution.

A-Cheng was right, no matter how much she wanted to use it and remind people that they had their own failures too, the ramifications of dropping that sort of bomb on the cultivation world would be wide reaching, and out of all of them A-Xian would be the easiest target.

A flick of a fan drew her eye to Nie Huaisang, who watched her calmly, ignoring all the commotion to his side. He looked to her brothers, and then up at the sky. No, to A-Xian and then up at the sun.

For the first time, someone with power, far more power than their mother, then their father even, favored A-Xian. She'd thought earlier that Wen Ruohan would protect A-Xian from her mother, but that wasn't all, was it?

Wen Ruohan truly favored him enough, cared about him enough to help her protect him from the other sects as well no matter how her parents felt about it.

"Do it," she said.

Nie Huisang dropped his fan, suddenly aghast and surprised while A-Cheng and A-Xian gaped at her.

"Jie?" A-Cheng asked.

She smiled, and all three boys stepped back. It was one of her mother's smiles. The one she wore as she cornered her prey, be they wayward disciples or the target of a night hunt.

"Jin Zixun is pathetic, and I am tired of him insulting all of us and no one reminding him what it means to have class."

A-Xian laughed, while Nie Huisang quickly and obviously ducked for his fan, not quite hiding his grin.

A-Cheng looked at her, his face in the practiced blankness he would show mother with when she was particularly sharp with her critique of his failures. Jiang Yanli had never seen it directed at her, and it almost made her regret her words. "What about Jin Zixuan?" He asked her. "And Madam Jin won't be happy either."

Unspoken was what Jin Guangshan himself would think and what the repercussions would be.

A-Xian pressed his lips closed tightly, looking back and forth between the two of them apprehensively. Poor thing. She and A-Cheng had never really been at odds before, so if he made one of them happy the other would be happy too. He must not know what to do or who to support right now, as by voicing his opinions he'd be putting himself against one of them.

She smiled reassuringly at both her brothers. A-Cheng made a valid point, but one that underscored one of the more important reasons why she wanted them to do this.

“I care for him,” she said. She probably even loved him, though sometimes these days she wondered if it was more that she loved the idea of him that she had built in her head. The idea that she would be able to escape Mother and finally begin to build a place of her own, where she could do as she wished and care for those she loved however she chose without censure. “And I will always wish him well for the role he played in my life and do what I can to support him, but his opinions of me are... He has made his own lack of care clear.” Both her brothers looked like they wanted to argue, but she raised her hand to stop them. “If my engagement to him is renewed, I would not spend my life listening to Jin Zixuan or any of his family insult you two, unable to do anything.”

Previously, she would have told them not to unleash this on the sects. To not risk angering the powerful people with brittle egos that surrounded them and drawing their rage which Mother would be happy to take from their hides. For while there was no question that Nie Mingjue would protect his little brother, A-Cheng and A-Xian would be left up to Father, who would once again hand over any punishments to Mother. Jiang Yanli would have only been able to defend A-Cheng with what words she could muster, while defending the son of a servant could only worsen the situation.

But Wen Ruohan...

Jiang Yanli didn't know what exactly Wen Ruohan wanted from A-Xian. What his price would be not just for what he had already given A-Xian, but for defending him from the cultivation world's elite if he enacted this talisman. But she knew in heart that Wen Ruohan would protect her brother. And no matter what happened, Jiang Yanli would be there for A-Xian to help him pay the price.

Her smile gentled as she turned her focus to A-Xian for a moment before she met her littlest brother's eyes and let all the buried rage, the damage, the pain show. A-Cheng regarded her, wanting to make sure she was sure.

Jiang Yanli nodded resolutely, and A-Cheng shifted, losing the forced blankness as determination and no small amount of vindictive glee formed in his gaze. She knew it infuriated him as much as her, all the rumors that surrounded the three of them and their parentage. Every time Mother spat in Father's face that Wei Wuxian was the son he favored best and Father didn't argue, it gouged a piece of him out.

Every time their parents looked down on them, found them wanting, dismissed them, it hurt like a thousand knives to their hearts.

And if they had learned one lesson at their mother's knee, it was that you hurt the people that hurt you.

“Remind them that we are not to be looked down upon.”

## Chapter End Notes

As always, please point out any mistakes that you catch! :)

So... I hope I played this well? It really, really got away from me and ended up way longer than I planned.

I wanted to portray Meng Yao as less hardened and not quite as twisted yet, but still conniving and ruthlessly practical when he needs to be. I also think that while his upbringing gave him too much practice at the grin and bear it approach, he got picked up by WWX before he could really wallow in his humiliation and had to live in a city staring up at Koi Tower seething in negativity. Also he ended up in what is a relatively stable position with someone to essentially idolize like in canon, but hadn't been overly hardened by landing in the Nie Sect, which was not the best fit ideal/personality wise, and then arguably ordered by his deadbeat dad to betray them and join up with a torture happy nutcase leading a war which is probably not the best for someone's mental health. I figured while he's had the first kick down the stairs, that wasn't quite enough to completely screw him up. Being in an environment where he is encouraged, recognized, and appreciated for who he is keeping him from going all murder happy even if he does start wracking up a body count and is surprisingly okay with torture even if it isn't his first choice in this timeline.

I tried to research pay and vacation in ancient China since we don't get a ton of that in canon, and just went down a rabbit hole with all the different dynasties and social classes, so we're going with a weird merged form where Meng Yao basically gets paid for X interval in advance, and while he gets 1 day off every five days like a Han Dynasty official, he gets a week off every six months, that's the break he and WWX are talking about.

~~Also, I may have just failed at Google-fu, but while I could find a lot of information about the rudimentary blood transfusions and related risks for ye olde European countries, I didn't come up with much for most of the older Chinese dynasties. I hope the idea of blood transfusions wasn't considered taboo or anything historically but wasn't sure, so I tried to keep it kinda vague and still fit it in within the story. IDK, please let me know if I wrote something offensive and I'll try and fix it. Thanks to [Miriel Therinde](#) for the first hand info on how blood transfusions are handled. I edited the section and hopefully it is a little better. Knowing me I made it worse though so if it is still off please let me know!~~

# Chapter Six

## Chapter Notes

Hey all! There is nothing graphic, but please check the updated tags jic.

Edits:

Posting the edits thanks to the amazing [Nonvocal Seagull \(FluffyTheTerrible\)](#)!

Also added an additional list at the end for the folks that wanted the reveals listed out.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Wen Ruohan scowled as he stalked through the halls of Koi Tower. Trust the Lan to not only wake up early, eat their boring, bland, horrible food early, but leave their damn guest rooms too damn early.

He'd finally been able to watch his grandson's behavior around the damned Second Jade last night as he'd had Jin Guangshan arrange their delegations to sit next to each other, and sure enough he'd been right. The boy had turned into a flighty mess the second they were within 50 feet of each other. Watching him stumble through an apology for touching the little icicle's headband a year ago had almost been painful.

And then Lan Wangji made a vaguely agreeable sound and nodded his head.

Wei Wuxian smiled so much it lit up the room.

Damn it all.

He'd known it would most likely happen, but having it shoved in his face that he'd be gaining the Lans as in-laws felt...

Wen Ruohan had steadily gotten exceedingly more drunk last night as he watched Wei Wuxian lavish far too much attention on the blank wall of a brat.

If Lan Wangji felt anything besides annoyance, Wen Ruohan hadn't seen much of it. Still his grandson seemed to get something from the conversation, which was all that really mattered. The least the other teen could do was respond with something other than monosyllabic sounds and the most proper, polite speech Wen Ruohan had ever heard intermixed with hissed comments about Wei Wuxian being shameless.

The interaction had some miniscule positives, though. When not exchanging silent looks with Nie Mingjue across the room or conversing with people that came up to him, Lan Xichen looked amused at the situation Lan Wangji found himself in. His gaze held a touch of concern

too, but it seemed more of general caution any smart man would have about someone in his family engaging with someone with potentially conflicting interests from another sect.

And Lan Wangji had accepted his grandson's apology and remained engaged with him despite the occasional glares Lan Qiren sent their way. Even at his most frustrated, the Second Jade never seemed actually angry.

Also Wen Qing and Wen Qionglin both looked at them equally exasperated and unsurprised in between chatting quietly together with Xu-er, which meant that this type of interaction had likely been the usual back in the Cloud Recesses. While he still didn't know if Lan Wangji felt the same way as his grandson, at least his behavior towards him remained unchanged. Meng Yao's rather thorough reports had highlighted several individuals who had quite suddenly become alternately much nicer or much colder to Wei Wuxian after he came into Wen Ruohan's favor.

Xu-er himself had looked torn between amusement at the way Lan Wangji got increasingly frustrated as the night went on, and confusion at why Wei Wuxian was paying so much attention to someone else.

Thanks to his grandson's horrendous flirting, Wen Ruohan came to the uncomfortable realization that he'd never had the sex talk with his son, which was fine as per Wen Qing's reports he'd figured it out well enough on his own, but that meant he'd never actually explained to him what a normal relationship would look like. Xu-er's only really immediate experience with romantic relationships were of Wen Chao's and the more polite presentations that people put on in company. His cohort weren't made of the damn idiots that Wen Chao's were, but none of them were married either.

He'd told himself he'd handle it in the morning, and he still had no idea what to do with the situation.

Maybe he could make Wen Qing sit Xu-er down and explain it?

His cousin would be a good option, right?

Ugh, no.

He'd deal with figuring it out tomorrow. Maybe he'd get lucky and Xu-er would figure it out like he did with sex.

For now Wen Ruohan had a more immediate issue to deal with.

Among other topics like talismans, night hunting, their time at the Cloud Recesses, and for some strange reason bunnies, Wei Wuxian had actually, full on whined about Lan Wangji not replying to any of his letters.

Whined.

Like a three year old.



Wen Qing had thrown a peanut at Wei Wuxian hard enough it bounced off him and got stuck in Lan Qiren's hair without the man realizing it, which had been the only thing that salvaged the experience.

Luckily Wei Wuxian had been so busy silently panicking with Wen Qing and Wen Qionglin as Xu-er tried heroically not to laugh, that he had missed the way that Lan Wangji's face had turned completely to him ignoring everything else to stare at his grandson. His eyes had widened just a tad, his ears had gone a little red, and definite affection was clear to those who looked closely. He would have been much happier at the revelation if there had not also been confusion.

Wen Ruohan felt fairly certain he had been the only one to hear Lan Wangji's confused question, as even with his very exceptional hearing he'd only picked up the words "no letters".

Someone raised another toast then, distracting everyone. To his credit, as the night went on. Lan Wangji several times tried to bring the subject up again, but something always interrupted, and he hadn't been able to before the Lans left the banquet, always one of the first sects to do so.

Wen Ruohan asked Meng Yao about the situation later that evening before he retired, and it turned out that Wei Wuxian had regularly written to Lan Wangji. Twelve letters had been sent from Lotus Pier, and in the last two months Wei Wuxian had even sent three from the Nightless City. Meng Yao had ensured that those ones were delivered to the Cloud Recesses promptly and with all due importance, though his messengers had not been able to give them to the Second Young Master Lan directly.

If Lan Wangji hadn't received the letters, which he felt inclined to believe after having watched him last night, it meant that someone had been intercepting the letters. Given Meng Yao had had them delivered directly to the Cloud Recesses, it narrowed down the suspects considerably.

There were many elders that could have intercepted the letters, or even Lan Wangji's older brother, but there was really only one person who had the authority to do so without repercussions, especially given the discourtesy directed towards Wei Wuxian by the lack of replies.

Wen Ruohan scowled. He'd known that Lan Qiren, much like Jiang Fengmian, kept his head buried in the past. But while Jiang Fengmian at least cherished his daughter's memories, the fool didn't appreciate the precious time he'd spent with his perfect, amazing daughter. He saw the vivaciousness, the brightness she and her son had inherited as a problem. As something to be stamped out.

Lan Qiren remained so blinded by his own preconceived notions and prejudices that he had actually thrown a book at Wei Wuxian on the boy's first day as his student. Wen Ruohan hadn't really doubted the story his grandson had told him, but he thought it might be slightly exaggerated or otherwise embellished the way that some of his other stories had.

His spies had informed him otherwise.

Once Meng Yao had become more involved, they'd gained access to a spy skilled enough to peek at the records for the visiting lectures. Not only were Wei Wuxian's scores incongruent with what he knew of the boy's intelligence, much like with the harpy of Lotus Pier infractions or perceived faults resulted in his grandson being punished when they would be ignored or let off with a warning in others. Luckily for his future in-law, the man mostly kept it to copying the inordinate number of rules the Lan had, though there had been a few instances of kneeling and other minor physical punishments. Wei Wuxian had been beaten once, though as Lan Wangji had been beaten at the same time, Wen Ruohan had decided to reserve judgment on that.

Altogether Wei Wuxian racked up nearly triple the amount of punishments provided to other students, and the punishments lasted for much longer, one of which lasted an entire month, even though the boy had only been there half the time.

While Wei Wuxian had his moments of irrepressibleness, when it came to learning there was no more enthusiastic and engaged student than his grandson.

If Lan Qiren actually tried as a teacher rather than giving the same boring lectures that Cloud Recesses gave every time they entertained guest disciples, maybe the whole fiasco would have turned out better.

Wen Ruohan had initially planned his own "guest lectures" as a way to keep the heirs of all the sects hostage, however he'd scrapped that when he rethought his plans. Perhaps he should dust off the idea. Maybe make it a joint project for Xu-er, Wei Wuxian, and Wen Qionglin to further encourage the bond the three were developing?

That and a few more night hunts might be able to keep them distracted while Wen Ruohan finished investigating the last few pieces of information he required to determine which of the six overall strategies he would be using to put the other sects in their place.

Unfortunately the damn Lans weren't where they were supposed to be putting him behind schedule for the day and he wasn't familiar enough with their qi to trace them by it even if they were in range.

After three days of various sects arriving culminating in last night's welcome banquet, today marked the first day of actual discussions and events.

If Wen Ruohan didn't catch the acting sect leader now, he'd be delayed until tomorrow and that would push back his schedule to get to the sect leaders from the Zizhou and Yueyang Chang clans.

Normally the great sects would each be served breakfast in their rooms, especially the Lan as they rose so early, but perhaps they had chosen to partake in the communal breakfast with the smaller sects for some reason?

No.

That didn't fit.

Wen Ruohan practically growled, scattering servants in his wake as stalked towards the main hall. At the very least Meng Yao would be in that area, finishing any final preparations needed for the events starting today. Even though he wasn't officially in charge of them, Wu-er and Jia Enlai had taken him up on his offer to help and dumped almost everything for the disciples under fourteen on him. Luckily most of that group were from Wei Wuxian's pack of personally trained disciples, so they didn't cause him much trouble, and were even quite useful as Meng Yao had subtly started training a few of them to assist himself.

Wen Ruohan had been quite amused to see several of them running around, pretending to be innocent, wide eyed little naifs interested in all the "amazing cultivators! Can you really blow up someone's head with a xiao? And did you really take out three bird yao by using a flame talisman and a net!?" Watching the originally suspicious cultivators melt and wrap around the children's fingers had been the third best thing to come out of this discussion conference so far.

The second best had been his rather interesting discussion with Jiang Yanli two days ago. How two disasters like Jiang Fengmian and Yu Ziyuan turned out someone like that was beyond his comprehension. The girl had very weak cultivation, barely enough to carry her sword, which she had done only when arriving, and likely not enough to fly. That she had been invited to the Cloud Recesses guest lectures with her brothers seemed impossible, though he would not put it past all involved for there to have been some type of additional exchange involved so that Jiang Yanli could attend and spend more time with her then fiance.

The best thing, however, has been the way his grandson lit up whenever he saw any of his true family even as most of the Jiangs radiated disapproval in their various ways. The joy he felt each time Wei Wuxian had glanced at him rather than Jiang Fengmian for approval or recognition nearly rivaled the times the boy's grandmother had let him know she loved him.

He hadn't made more than a token protest at being roomed next to Wen Ruohan rather than with the Jiangs. When Wen Ruohan had indicated Wei Wuxian would eat with them last night rather than with the Jiang like he had the previous night, his grandson had bowed in agreement without a single glance at Jiang Fengmian. He'd let Meng Yao manage things expertly, ensuring that Wei Wuxian could split his time perfectly between taking care of his duties as first disciple of the Jiang and visiting all his Wen students. Whenever Madam Yu had even looked at Wei Wuxian, Meng Yao had been there in Wen robes, smiling perfectly politely at her.

According to Meng Yao's reports, aside from disparaging comments about sons of servants and whores getting too uppity and promises to discuss the situation later, the vile woman hadn't made any other moves.

Good.

He was so close.

He needed to find the Lan.

As Wen Ruohan grew nearer to the main hall, he heard raised voices and hurried towards them, passing several scurrying servants as he went. While it wasn't a guarantee, if you ever

lost sight of his grandson and then someone screamed, Wei Wuxian tended to be nearby.

Wei Wuxian had been up unusually early this morning, and according to Xu-er only grabbed a quick bite to eat before running off to find the Jiang heir. Perhaps he'd be able to say good morning to the boy before he hunted down the Lans. Or given the way Wei Wuxian had been drawn to Lan Wangji they'd be in the same place.

“-cause you're sucking Wen Ruohan's cock you even dare be so shameless in Koi Tower, you worthless son of a whore!”

Well, someone would be bleeding soon, Wen Ruohan thought as he stormed into the main hall just in time to see Jiang Yanli barely stop Wei Wuxian from punching Jin Zixun in the face.

Such a shame. He's sure Wei Wuxian would have enjoyed that. Maybe he should tell Jin Guangshan to hang the pathetic little worm up to be the Wen's practice dummy and he could let his grandson and Xu-er go a few rounds?

His grandson and Lady Jiang stood in front of Meng Yao, Nie Huaisang, and two younger looking youths dressed in servant's uniforms. While Wei Wuxian glared down Jin Zixun and a horde of Jin cronies that reminded him of Wen Chao's sycophants, Jiang Yanli had a smile that could cut diamonds on her face. The servants and various disciples scattered around the hall that clearly hadn't been able to make it out cowered back against the walls.

“What is going on here?!” Nie Mingjue bellowed before Wen Ruohan could say anything, his deep voice echoing through the hall. Luckily that broke the stare down as everyone turned to the enraged Nie Sect Leader.

“DA-GE!” Nie Huaisang practically wailed, throwing himself damn near across the hall to practically glom onto his brother. “Da-ge! We were just working on a talisman an-”

“Oh please! You and that son of a servant were loitering in the middle of the hall being a damn nuisance, not working on a talisman! And you even dare get in the way of us punishing our servants!” Jin Zixun snapped. “This is Koi Tower, not on-”

“Is this how the Jin treat their guests?” Wen Ruohan asked, sauntering over to stand next to his grandson. “I'll need to speak to Sect Leader Jin if it is, it's a poor display for all the visiting sects.” Jin Zixun froze, finally starting to clue in to his audience. Wen Ruohan grinned, showing teeth. Wei Wuxian did know just how to draw and keep someone's attention if he really wanted to piss them off. It was quite the gift.

Both Wei Wuxian and Jiang Yanli bowed their heads appropriately, greeting both him and Nie Mingjue. Wen Ruohan grinned even more as the other sect leader bit back a grimace at having to be on his side as he led his brother and several of his disciples to the center of the room, cleanly interjecting them in between the two opposing parties.

Oh this might be worth being a bit behind schedule after all. Jin Zixun had been begging to be beat down for ages now, and Nie Mingjue was so much more entertaining to rile up than his father.

Maybe he'd just tell the Chang clan to do what he asked or he would end their entire bloodline rather than bother negotiating for their cooperation. If they didn't accept it wouldn't take more than a squad to slaughter them all. It would certainly be faster and the reduced bargaining time meant he could catch up with the Lans later. Maybe use it as an excuse to bother Lan Qiren during lunch and force him to break that stupid no talking while eating rule.

Enjoying the little things really truly kept life worth living.

Suddenly Jiang Wanyin barged through one of the doors in a rush, two Jiang disciples hot on his heels. He quickly made his greetings as he hurried to his siblings' side. He probably thought he was being subtle, making finger signs to Wei Wuxian, but he really wasn't, especially when his grandson was making just as many back, and Nie Huaisang looked a little panicked in the background behind his fan.

Wen Ruohan glanced at Nie Mingjue, and the man actually rolled his and nodded at him.

He'd need to have Meng Yao work with his grandson on subtlety, but for now he'd help the boy.

"I would very much like an answer to Sect Leader Nie's question, Jin Zixun," Wen Ruohan stated, drawing the attention of the room.

The idiot was finally starting to look worried, and quite a few of his little cronies had vanished into the rabble at the edges of the room.

"It seems we're drawing a crowd," Jiang Yanli interjected, her smile now sweet rather than sharp. "Perhaps we should move this somewhere quieter, as well as request that Sect Leader Jiang and Sect Leader Jin join us?"

Given the sudden obviously fakely earnest faces on the three boys, Wen Ruohan sighed. Whatever this chaos would shape up to be, Jiang Yanli likely counted among the conspirators.

Based on reports she normally played the part of keeping her brothers out of trouble, not assisting them.

"It might not be a bad idea," Nie Mingjue stated. "We can-"

Suddenly bright light burst up from the floor almost right where Wei Wuxian had been standing, and hovered about head height.

Yes, Meng Yao would definitely be giving his grandson lessons in subtlety. Making a show wasn't necessarily a bad thing, but sometimes plausible deniability could be beneficial.

The ball of light suddenly shot into the air and through the ceiling. Moments later a large gust of wind charged with spiritual energy slammed through all the open doors of the hall. The sudden shift in air pressure caused even Wen Ruohan's ears to pop, and he sighed as Nie Mingjue cursed and almost everyone started shrieking. The wind circled the room in a rush,

gathering speed and power as it went, first ripping at clothes and tapestries before knocking less steady servants and disciples off their feet.

Almost as quickly as the wind forced itself into the room, it began sucking itself up along the trail of the talisman like water in a whirlpool. Instead of breaking against the roof, the air and energy seemed to slide through the wall as if it was a ghost.

After the ruckus of the wind, the sudden silence was almost defining.

Wen Ruohan looked down from the roof to his grandson and raised an eyebrow.

Wei Wuxian shrugged sheepishly, helping Jiang Yanli fix her wind disheveled skirts from where Jiang Cheng held her steady. Meng Yao was kneeling behind them to check on the two child servants that had fallen to the floor. "I didn't think it would be that bad, plus I was going to set off one of my stink talismans to get everyone out anyway."

"Somehow I have the feeling that it was a 'we', not an 'I'," Nie Mingjue spat, moving his hand from where it was keeping a grip on his fluttering brother. To give the man credit, not a single Nie had been knocked off their feet. "What did you three do this time?"

"Th-the- Ho-how da-" They all turned to look at Jin Zixun, who was being helped to his feet by a couple of cronies. His face was scrunched up in a way that was probably rage, but really just looked like he needed to take a shit, and he held a shaky hand pointing at Wei Wuxian.

"You'll need to speak clearly to raise a concern, Young Master Jin," Wen Ruohan told him. And this was the second in line to the Jin sect?

Really, he would be doing them all a favor, killing most of the legitimate Jins and putting one of Jin Guangshan's bastards in charge.

"HOW DARE YOU ATTACK THE JIN YOU UNGRATEFUL SON OF A SERVANT!" Jin Zixun screeched, and Wen Ruohan gave him credit, he was louder than the damn windstorm.

"It wasn't an attack," Wei Wuxian actually snapped back in a way he wouldn't have done even six months ago, and it warmed his heart at how confident the boy had grown.

"Seriously, the ten year olds I teach can tell the difference between a hostile spiritual attack and something non-violent." He blinked.

Wen Ruohan bit back a laugh. Sure enough, while all the other cultivators in the room looked cautious, none of them had swords out or were overly defensive. Whatever his grandson had done, there was no resentment or malice in the spiritual energy.

"Well if it wasn't an attack, what was it?" Jin Zixun spat.

Suddenly the room lit up with the glow of spiritual energy again, but this time not with a single ball, but threads.

"This!" Wei Wuxian grinned.

XxXxX

In one of the Jin gardens, Lan Qiren watched as his nephews completed their handstands. He'd insisted on an extra long meditation session this morning outside the oppressive atmosphere of Koi Tower itself, given how they had behaved the night before and how hectic today would be.

Lan Xichen should have known better than to stay out late drinking with Nie Mingjue, and that he burned away all the alcohol with his golden core was no excuse. And the way Lan Wangji had let that menace rile him up... Bah!

He'd raised his nephews better than this.

He was about to call for the boys to regain their feet when they were nearly toppled by a blast of wind heading from the outer walls towards Koi Tower. Lan Qiren planted his feet and with a quick slash of his sword sliced through the wind so it split around him. The wind barreled through the garden, not harming anything for all its strength.

"What was that?" Lan Xichen asked, both nephews flipping to their feet neatly.

"Something caused by that damn Wei Wuxian's probably," Lan Qiren scowled. That boy liked to cause chaos just as much as his mother, and he would be the only disciple here shameless enough to cause a commotion with all the sects gathered and everyone else on their best behavior.

Lan Wangji frowned at him, and he bit back the order to get back on his hands until the blood flow restored some sense to his brain, but it wasn't the time. "Uncle," Lan Xichen started, but he waved him silent.

"We should get to Koi Tower," he told his nephews. "At the very least."

A bright gold thread appeared between his nephews as he blinked. Lan Wangji reacted a split second faster than Lan Xichen, pulling Bichen and slashing at the thread in one clean movement. Bichen went right through the thread without affecting it.

Almost immediately after another thread appeared on Lan Wangji leading from him, right towards...

He looked down. The green thread was attached to his own chest.

"Uncle," Lan Xichen started, but before he could finish, a yellow thread appeared between him and Lan Qiren. It was shortly followed by a second thread connecting his nephews, this time pink.

Lan Qiren suddenly had a terrible, terrible feeling in his gut. It only worsened when two gray lines appeared from Lan Qiren leading towards Koi Tower.

"Stay here!" Lan Qiren ordered his nephews, quickly mounting his sword.

"Wait!" A hand grabbed his robes, and he turned a glare on Xichen. "We don't know what this is, you can't go on your own!" Lan Wangji nodded swiftly behind his brother.

“I am sure it is nothing,” he said. “Do as I say.”

“If it is nothing there is no reason for us not to come with you,” Lan Xichen rebutted.

No.

No.

While it was only the smallest possibility, if these threads had even the smallest chance of meaning what he thought they did, his nephews could not find out.

Lan Qiren refused.

This matter was done.

It had done all the damage he would allow.

“You will stop arguing and stay here!” He snapped.

Suddenly a scream tore through the air, and the decision was taken from him as Lan Wangji was in the air heading in its direction. Xichen looked torn between them, and Lan Qiren was tempted to order him to go after Lan Wangji, but the threads stretched, following them. If his nephews would not stay put where they could not see or hear anything, he had to stay with them.

He shot after Lan Wangji, Lan Xichen at his side.

It didn’t take them long to catch up to where Lan Wangji had engaged three Jin cultivators in combat. His nephew was fighting defensively, trying to disarm only, but his opponents were not. Combined with protecting the four women, two of which were cradling crying children to their chests, behind him and he wasn’t able to get in position for a decisive blow.

Lan Qiren and Lan Xichen dropped out of the air behind the Jin, using the surprise to make quick work of knocking them out.

The women sobbed thank yous, and it didn’t take him long to determine what had happened just from the sight of them. While the four women had glowing white threads between them, the two children, an infant so wrapped in swaddling blankets he could not tell the gender, and a little girl, her hair in pigtails biting her thumb, had multiple colors sprouting from them. In between the two were bright, glowing gold and yellow threads, while green threads shot from them to each woman except their mothers, who were connected to the children by orange threads.

Another orange thread, along with a multitude of gold threads raced from the children back to Koi Tower, joined by more orange and gold threads from the area around Koi Tower than Lan Qiren could count.

“Uncle?” Lan Xichen asked behind him, sounding more scared than he had been since he was a child, asking him what he should do to help his little brother so he didn’t spend the night crying in front of the Gentian House again.



His nephews were not idiots.

It was obvious what the different colors meant.

Lan Qiren closed his eyes.

No.

No.

Please no.

XxXxX

The first thing that gave him the idea for the talisman had been that when he tested families, children most often had the same blood types as their parents.

Unfortunately some didn't.

Wei Wuxian might be an idiot, but one only had to look at the Jiang's for one of the better examples of what could happen when there was even a hint of infidelity in a marriage. More than a few of the women and children on the streets or in brothels were there because a husband thought their wife, concubine, or lover cheated.

Even those were good stories compared to some of the stories that resulted in ghosts and vengeful spirits.

He'd worked out blood to blood without issue, but if people didn't want to bleed it got annoying. The talisman required a wide range because of how the spirit energy needed to be collected and the matrix for the match comparison. He'd made a few more adjustments as he and Wen Qing completed tests with the blood typing talisman, but they'd been minor, and it had mainly been a back burner project.

He'd had so many other things to work on, both at Lotus Pier and especially the Nightless City.

The Nightless City.

The stories didn't do it justice, both in the good ways and the bad.

The center of the Nightless City, its sun, was Wen Ruohan.

Just as the sun warmed both crops and life needed to grow but could burn too hot and turn your skin red while boiling your brain with heat stroke, Ren Ruohan was a double edged sword.

Everything at the Nightless City he became involved in revolved around making Wei Wuxian happy, making him feel safe. It scratched through his head like a rusty sword through a scabbard, something that should be perfect, but didn't feel right.

How could it?

Even through the thin lacquer of happiness around him, he saw the hurt.

The way people seemed terrified of doing something wrong and drawing Wen Ruohan's attention.

Wei Wuxian knew that the Inferno Palace existed.

That anyone who upset Wen Ruohan would pray for someone as merciful as Madam Yu to be handling the punishment.

He knew that despite the pretty words Wen Ruohan wrapped the situation up in, the Wen had been pushing night hunts into other territories, making moves on smaller sects.

None of the bad things were lies.

But the good things.

None of those were either.

Wen Ning was still a giant fluffball, same with Wen Qing underneath her needles.

A-Xu...

A-Xu definitely had some odd ideas about how to go about things, but despite his oddities, he was refreshingly upfront about things, like how much he didn't really care about anyone except a few people. He supported almost any idea Wei Wuxian came up with and if needed, dragged his nearly equally as psychotic friends along with.

For some reason he respected Wei Wuxian and just let him be him, and demanded that respect from others too.

Like, Wei Wuxian was playing with some street kids he once bought meals for back when they had lunch together at a street stall, as A-Xu sat at their table and watched while he sipped at his wine when a passing merchant had yelled at him for encouraging the filthy little beggars then spat at him, but before Wei Wuxian could say anything, A-Xu had floored the man with a single punch.

He'd had to stop A-Xu from killing him, somehow talking the Wen heir into just confiscating all his assets and using them to take care of the poor while he ended up beggared himself.

It felt, well, not entirely surprising that the heir to Wen Ruohan was so cavalier about killing someone for such a small slight, but it had felt weird that it was a slight to Wei Wuxian that set him off.

Even at Lotus Pier, while all the disciples and regular merchants or tradespeople had over time learned to just ignore him, visiting figures would sometimes be offended at him doing something similar, especially when they learned he was just the son of a servant. If Shijie was

nearby she'd try to defend him, but people had the tendency to look down on her despite her family, which made Wei Wuxian grit his teeth in frustration.

If Shijie had been from any type of rich commoner family, or really anything but a cultivation sect's main clan, someone like her would be lauded as a perfect future wife for someone. A beautiful, well-mannered, soft-spoken young woman from good blood who excelled at taking care of her family would have been highly sought after.

Instead idiots thought her even more weak and pathetic than Wei Wuxian.

They both got disparaged in different ways.

Jiang Cheng used to yell at people and argue in their defense, but Madam Yu kept taking him to task for not behaving as a future sect leader should and endangering alliances for a mere son of a servant, though she merely scolded him for not being more diplomatic when it came to Shijie, so they'd asked him to stop.

Neither of them minded themselves being insulted, though someone insulting the other was different.

While Shijie would handle people looking down on him by finding more appropriate ways for Jiang Cheng to take someone to task, Wei Wuxian didn't quite have that patience.

Wei Wuxian generally tried to live by the words his mother had taught him, one of the few things he recalled, to remember the good and forget the bad, but sometimes when the bad happened to those he loved, the people that were actually worth something...

Well, he did things like punching the Peacock, regardless of the consequences.

To see someone do the same thing for him of all people...

To see Meng Yao and so many others work for his happiness still doesn't feel quite right, especially because he isn't blind and knows for a fact that Meng Yao is using less than righteous means. At least murder didn't seem to be his first choice like A-Xu.

And, in spite of everything, he couldn't really help himself from thinking of A-Xu and A-Yao as friends.

It wasn't the easy type of friendship that he found himself in with Wen Ning and Wen Qing, where he never really had issues with anything they did, except for sometimes Wen Qing and even then he could see why in her eyes. She felt the same terror he did at the thought of anyone hurting the people she cared about, but she had her whole family and with her position close to someone like Wen Ruohan, the threat was more than implicit.

He'd kept trying to figure out why Wen Ruohan, why the others, cared about him.

He'd been able to figure out everyone except Wen Ruohan.

Wen Ning was like him, in that he gravitated to the few people that were really, actually nice to him.

Wen Qing saw Wen Ning in him, along with that same kind of protector instinct she had, which meant tying him to Wen Ning and her family meant he would protect them if she couldn't.

Wen Xu, A-Xu, he'd initially liked Wei Wuxian because of his Father's interest, but he felt fairly certain it had moved beyond that. He didn't really flinch from him, or treat him any differently, which was probably a novel thing for him.

Meng Yao, poor A-Yao, given their similar pasts he probably only liked Wei Wuxian for the same reason he himself had become so attached to the Jiangs. He'd kept trying to ensure A-Yao had more friends and understand that he didn't owe Wei Wuxian anything, but it would be a long process.

Wen Ruohan, though, hadn't really had a clear reason.

He'd long ago ruled out that Wen Ruohan wanted to sleep with him.

Adopt him into a branch clan like Wen Zhuliu, maybe. But it didn't fit.

He'd met several people that had been adopted into branch clans like the Core Melting Hand, and all of them had certain expectations placed on them that didn't match the ones, or more really the lack of ones, that were placed on Wei Wuxian.

Wen Ruohan didn't seem to care if Wei Wuxian did anything other than come visit, attend dinners, learn, and apparently have a good time.

He'd indulged him just like he did Wen Xu and Wen Chao.

It had been when he was complimenting a little girl, keeping her distracted while Wen Qing used the blood test talisman on her and her parents, saying she had the same pretty eyes as her mother, when it hit him.

Jiang Fengmian had been able to find him on the streets because he looked very much like his parents, especially his mother's eyes. When Wen Ruohan first called him up to sit by him at the Qishen Wen discussion conference, he'd caught Wei Wuxian's face, examining his features, his hair, his eyes.

Wei Wuxian hadn't been sure, but Wen Ruohan must have seen that he looked like his parents.

He'd never heard stories about the man caring about them like Uncle Jiang did, so he didn't know for certain that was it.

Wei Wuxian had tried to dig into how Wen Ruohan might've known his parents, but couldn't find anything until he talked to the Wen forge master about engraving jewelry to help direct spiritual energy. When Wei Wuxian said how much he loved one of the guans the man made for him, the forge master'd let it slip that the piece had been remade from a piece Wen Ruohan initially commissioned for his first love, a woman he'd been planning to marry

before she disappeared leaving the sect leader who then married Wen Xu and Wen Chao's mother.

Could that woman have disappeared to Baoshan Sanren's mountain? And maybe given birth to Wei Wuxian's mother? Had Wei Wuxian reminded him of his possible grandmother like he reminded Uncle Jiang of his parents?

It still didn't fit exactly since the two men treated him so differently, but then again nothing else really fit either.

Without knowing for certain the truth of the matter, all he'd been able to do was to continue to try and keep Wen Ruohan happy, which hadn't been that hard.

Wei Wuxian just existing seemed to be everything Wen Ruohan needed.

It didn't make any sense!

Wen Ruohan, who honestly was terrifying and dangerous and basically evil, who didn't really care about almost everyone, especially if they were nobodies like Wei Wuxian, actually cared about him.

Like, really cared.

No one other than Shijie had paid so much attention to him, encouraged him, and... and protected him.

Made him feel... safe.

Like there was nothing Wei Wuxian could do that would cause Wen Ruohan to throw him away.

For the first time that Wei Wuxian could remember, someone had been unashamedly, unabashedly, proud of him.

While part of him railed at the fact it was someone like Wen Ruohan, the rest of him felt elated. He'd been so tired of having nowhere he could rest, nowhere he didn't need to worry about short tempers and constant disapproval. Where his nebulous position meant he had to bite his tongue and accept the blame.

Where his very existence just caused problems.

And for as bad as he was, it wasn't like Wen Ruohan didn't let Wei Wuxian help people! Because he did! And Wen Ruohan, even if he'd been lying about the source of the issues, had been fixing them. His disciples knocked out night hunts at an incredible pace, he gave the mayor of Caiyi town a huge sum to cover lost income for his people for the waterborne abyss...

He'd listened when Wei Wuxian saw something that bothered him, and helped him make changes.

Maybe it was because of the unlikely chance that Wei Wuxian reminded him of the love of his life, who might even be his grandmother.

There'd been a point, and he didn't quite know exactly when, that Wei Wuxian had stopped caring why.

It could have been when he realized that he dreaded returning to Lotus Pier, or the time that he'd shown Wen Ruohan a new talisman without being afraid that he'd yell at him for wasting his time, or when he'd learned that the reason the kitchens kept 'accidentally' making 'extra food' he could give to street kids was because Wen Ruohan had rearranged the budget and hired four more chefs so Wei Wuxian could give out meals as often as he wanted.

There really were so many moments Wen Ruohan threw everything Wei Wuxian understood out the window and left him reeling in confusion.

What he did know was that yesterday, after Shijie told them to use the talisman, Wei Wuxian whined that Madam Yu would put him through his paces for this, and Shijie told him that Wen Ruohan would protect him. And he'd... known it was true. He couldn't find any part of himself that disagreed with her.

Wei Wuxian wondered if believing in a different sect's leader before your own counted as betrayal, but he hoped not.

And honestly, aside from humiliating the Jins, he hadn't really thought the talisman would reveal anything else too crazy. There'd probably be a few fights, but that is why Nie Huaisang had, through a manner he refused to divulge, made sure that there were servants and guards on the lookout for any type of trouble. Nie disciples had also been strategically spread out to intervene if needed. If things got bad in the aftermath, Wei Wuxian knew with the same type of certainty he'd had that Wen Ruohan would protect him, that the Wen sect leader would help him make sure any women whose husbands decided to be assholes found a safe haven in the Nightless City, while Nie Huaisang stood ready to do the same in Qinghe.

Aside from that, of the people whose secrets could cause wide scale damage, the Jins were the only ones with dirty family 'secrets' that would be revealed by the talisman. After all, the Lans were the Lans, and too perfect to have any issues like that. Everyone knew that the Nies were half siblings, the Wens were definitely related, and the fact that Jiang Fengmian was not Wei Wuxian's father would finally be made abundantly clear.

For Wei Wuxian, his parents were dead. They hadn't had any immediate living relatives, or if they did, they certainly wouldn't be at the discussion conference.

He wouldn't have any lines leading to him, and he felt, well, not quite okay, but accepting of that. He had Shijie and Jiang Cheng, all the Wens and Meng Yao. And even Lan Zhan, who had started talking to him again!

They weren't blood family, but they made him happy.

It was why when the talisman went off he'd immediately looked over to the Jiang siblings, ignoring the spluttering mess of crazy lines of that asshole Jin Zixun, and crowed when the

only lines impacting them had been the white line between the two, and the orange lines leading to their parents. “Ha!” He cheered. “Knew it! I knew my mother wouldn’t cheat on my father!”

He’d known Uncle Jiang wasn’t his father.

Madam Yu could shove her accusations up her-

“A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli whispered, and he suddenly realized that both she and Jiang Cheng looked absolutely gobsmacked as they stared down at his chest.

What?

He glanced down and it took him a moment to recognize what he was seeing.

Where there shouldn’t have been any threads, were three threads.

One was the gray of a second cousin leading to somewhere else in Koi Tower, but the other two, the other two...

He spun around to follow the directions of the threads and found himself face to face with Wen Ruohan, who the red thread led to.

Oh, Wen Ruohan was his grandfather.

XxXxX

Wen Ruohan did not cackle at the stumped looks on everyone’s faces, no matter how much he wanted to. And given the screams and curses that had broken out in the crowd, echoing from other parts of the tower too, his grandson took precedence.

Wei Wuxian ignored the shouts, staring almost transfixed at the line of spiritual energy connecting him to Wen Ruohan.

One of the other two strands likely led to Xu-er who, oh good timing, who skidded to a stop by his side, and someone else, though that third line didn’t really matter.

Not only was it now even clearer to everyone that Wei Wuxian belonged to Wen Ruohan, they knew why.

Xu-er, while not quite as enraptured at the strands, still eyed the line connecting him with his nephew with glee in his eyes. He’d always had a bit of a possessive streak.

Given he had already shown fondness for Wei Wuxian, that streak would undoubtedly be further directed to his nephew. Good. His plans to have them co-manage his realms as he enjoyed his own pursuits would work out perfectly well.

“It... was...” Nie Huaisang stuttered uselessly, his normally fluttering fan clutched in his grip, knuckles so pale and tight they looked about ready to split. The bright gold line connecting his and Nie Mingjue’s hearts glowed like the sun. They had a few gray lines

leading to a few of the other Nie, which they did not seem surprised by. The Jiangs also had fairly few strands.

On the other hand, Meng Yao and the walking corpse formerly known as Jin Zixun looked almost like porcupines with the number of threads attached to them. While there were a couple of purple, pink, or gray lines leading from each of them, and Jin Zixun had one green one, Meng Yao had to have at least two dozen gold strands connected to him. One of the equal number of yellow strands attached to Jin Zixun ran to Meng Yao.

“My fault,” Wei Wuxian quickly interjected, shaking out of his stupor, though he still kept glancing at the glowing lines connecting him to Wen Ruohan and Xu-er. “Jin Zixun just wouldn’t stop calling Meng Yao the son of a prostitute and insulting Shijie... And then yesterday morning Jin Zixun called Shijie foolish for defending me, which you know, while I deserve what people throw at me, but he doesn’t get to talk bad about her, and I just figured, why not remind them of exactly how many half siblings the peacock actually had through the people they looked down on.”

Another shriek came from somewhere in the tower, along with what sounded like an entire wall coming down. While he noted that he’d need to remind Wei Wuxian that he most certainly did not deserve what idiots “threw” at him and that he should hold them to account more often, Wen Ruohan couldn’t help the proud smile that took over his features. He’d plotted for ages, planned carefully for every contingency to sow discord, and all it took to throw his enemies into chaos was his grandson getting annoyed at the insults of two trumped up pompous brats.

“How did you manage the vectors for the degrees of relation?” He asked as he poked at the four strands connected to him, trying to get a feel for the spellwork. Wei Wuxian and Xu-er were obvious, the other two gray strands most likely were Wen Qing and Wen Qionglin as they were his only other close relatives at the conference. This had all the creative hallmarks of his grandson’s work.

Truly exceptional.

“Oh, I crossed it with a blood matrix and used spirit resonance to cause the color variation based on match criteria,” Wei Wuxian stated. “It wasn’t tha-”

“What have I told you about false modesty?”

“It’s not false, it’s really- I mean it’s not going to last much longer anyway!”

“Nonsense!” Wen Ruohan grinned. “That it works so well for a first run is exceptional. For the matrix, did y-”

“Wei Wuxian!” Came a rather horrendous shriek from one of the hallways leading back towards the Jin rooms.

His grandson’s eyes widened, and Wen Ruohan felt certain that only his already shocked state allowed that flash of dread to be visible. Not that it mattered though, because sure enough his grandson didn’t cower, as he turned and faced the direction of the screeching voice with an



absolutely perfect bow right as Yu Ziyuan practically flew into the main hall, Zidian crackling at her wrist.

Both her children stepped up right beside Wei Wuxian and quickly bowed as well. “How dare you cause such a disturbance!” The woman snapped, only to come up short, looking absolutely horrified. Wen Ruohan blinked. The third line leading from his grandson, the gray one, connected to her.

Ha! His love did come from the Shudong region, how fitting that she would be related to Madam Yu somewhere along the line.

Though really, it only made the way the bitch treated the boy so much worse.

The horror on her face quickly turned to rage, and Wen Ruohan allowed the slap he saw headed for his grandson. Xu-er unhappily took his lead. His grandson took the blow with a familiarity that Wen Ruohan would repay a thousand fold.

“Have you no shame!” She screeched.

“Madam Yu,” Wen Ruohan said, his calm facade belying how close she was to death. Her head snapped to him, ready to unleash that foolish tongue of hers, only to stop again, her small mind finally taking in the threads that led from Wei Wuxian to him and Xu-er.

He stepped up to Wei Wuxian, Jiang Yanli pulling that hot head of a brother of hers back to give him room. He placed his hand under Wei Wuxian’s chin again, much like he had done at the discussion conference a year ago. “A-Xian, you look so much like your grandmother,” Wen Ruohan told the boy.

It’d been on the tip of his tongue since he’d seen him, but the right time to say the words never came. Wei Wuxian had never been in the right mindset to believe him, especially since Wen Ruohan didn’t have any evidence. His grandson had been too suspicious, too jaded, too willing to believe that people only wanted to use him.

Now though, now Wen Ruohan had proof. Proof that no one could deny, just like they couldn’t deny the strands tying them to those around them. Even though the strands started to fade, the hall quickly filled with more disciples from all the major sects and most of the minor ones as they tried to identify the cause of the phenomena.

All of them had seen.

While he doubted Jin Guangshan would be able to join them based on the screams still ringing through Koi Tower, almost every other sect seemed to be represented, except for Jiang Fengmian and those blasted Lans.

Ah. And there were the Lans rushing in. His grandson’s crush for once clearly displayed emotions, looking almost like he was holding back tears while his older brother didn’t have that damn placid smile on his face, instead appearing tight-lipped and practically ghastly. That old goat Lan Qiren looked just short of apoplectic.

Nie Mingjue next to him made a pained sound, taking a half step towards Lan Xichen before his younger brother grabbed his arm. He'd known those two were close, but this was a nice confirmation of what would happen when he took further action. Though Wen Ruohan would need to figure out what exactly had been revealed as the strands had faded to the point he could no longer make out the colors. Whatever had those statue-like Lans looking like that might impact what it would cost him to have Lan Wangji marry in.

He doubted they'd seen that Wei Wuxian was his grandson specifically, but with the thread between them it would be clear who the boy belonged to.

He had held back this information far longer than he wanted as he had had no way to stake his true claim.

Thanks to Wei Wuxian himself, that had finally changed! Given Jiang Fengmian's wife's public, blatant disrespect to his clan, to his blood, and the animosity shown towards his grandson combined with the man's lack of support, he now had more than enough grounds to insist that the boy return to his mother's family. He might not have met his daughter, but he still knew her. She would have fought, just like her mother. And her husband had left his sect for his wife and child, so he doubted the man would complain about Wei Wuxian being brought to safety either.

"Despite Sect Leader Jiang not being here," Wen Ruohan told the woman, "I would like to discuss the treatment of my grandson." He relished the way the word rolled off his tongue. Perhaps he was being superstitious, but this was the first time he had said the word out loud. He had waited so long to say it. Not only had he not wanted to scare Wei Wuxian off, but a small part of him had worried that finding his grandson was too good to be true, a dream that would shatter if he spoke it aloud.

But now... now it wasn't a dream.

Wei Wuxian trusted him.

Had grown past his own fear and doubts, made himself at home in his place at Wen Ruohan's side.

He hadn't intended to use this discussion conference to reveal Wei Wuxian's heritage.

Wen Ruohan had merely planned to use it to set up the last pieces of his slightly less hostile takeover plans, demonstrate how much better his disciples were in front of the whole cultivation world, and brag about his boys killing the Xuanwu of Slaughter while showing off the shell that would be delivered to be displayed tomorrow. It'd also been a good opportunity to flaunt his power and remind everyone that they couldn't go against him.

Harassing Jin Guangshan by pushing Meng Yao in his face and antagonizing the Jiangs with how much happier Wei Wuxian became around him were bonuses.

But now even though he would need to put some of his plans on hold due to the fallout of Wei Wuxian's chaos, he could move quite a few things up in the timeline. The most important of which was making it so his grandson could stay by his side full time. Not only

would he get to enjoy his company, he'd be able to help the boy overcome the last few of his doubts about his rightful place, and reassure him of the Wen's superiority, and why everyone else's rightful place was beneath them.

His grandson would never say he deserved the disparagement of idiotic fools ever again.

Wen Ruohan finally pulled his hand away from his grandson to glare at the worm that had dared to leave strips of scars on his grandson, and felt satisfaction at the way the woman turned red with unexpressed rage. "Wei Wuxian is the head disciple of the Jiang. Even if he is your grandson," she practically spat, "which still needs to be confirmed outside of whatever disaster of a joke this is, especially given how obviously wrong some of those links were, how sects handle discipline is an internal matter."

Wen Ruohan grinned sharply, feeling quite like a cat that had a whole flock of struggling birds to torment. "I haven't seen any false connections so far, just those that choose not to see the truth."

Almost on cue, more screams echoed into the room, these ones much closer, and several servants and disciples burst into the room at a sprint, obviously to get away from something. They were so focused on escaping that it took them a while to realize just what they had run into, and the sheer panic on their faces when they did warmed his heart. All the damage Wei Wuxian could do on a whim, how perfect.

"My grandson, everyone," he laughed, reaching out to rub Wei Wuxian's head fondly. While Wei Wuxian looked torn between the normal teenage horror at having someone being embarrassing about them in public, awe, and a healthy dose of bewilderment, he still leaned into the touch.

The hall that had just spewed servants and cultivators suddenly disgorged the flying form of one Jin Guangshan, who crashed into the floor, further scattering people towards the already crowded edges of the room. The sight of the pathetic wretch trying to pick his sorry self up from where he'd landed ass up and robes askew was probably one of the most pleasurable things he'd ever seen.

It reached even further heights of entertainment when Jiang Fengmian carefully moved backwards into the room, several Jin and Jiang disciples with him, keeping their eyes on the people that had undoubtedly done the damage to the Jin Sect Leader. His hands were raised placatingly, and his words soon became clear.

"-erstand that this is quite the shock, and justice needs to be done, but killing him now won't solve anything. He needs to be judged so that all his crimes might be addressed!"

"ARE THE ONES WE HAVE LEARNED OF NOT ENOUGH?" If Wen Ruohan placed the voice correctly, that would be Qin Cangye, who previously could be counted as one of Jin Guangshan's closest allies.

"THAT FILTHY DOG NEEDS TO DIE!" screamed another voice. Perhaps the leader of the Tingshan He? What was his name again?

“MY SISTER WILL BE AVENGED!” That one was the Zhoushan Zhao clan leader, Zhao Shanyuan. That clan had been growing quickly and displayed a dedication to competence that Wen Ruohan appreciated. They had only come to a few discussion conferences before, where they displayed a decent amount of success in the competitions. His reports indicated the clan leader’s son showed quite a bit of promise and would soon be able to participate in the larger events.

The three men were at the head of a decently sized crowd of cultivators from multiple sects, all of whom had murder painted across their faces. Oddly there were no Jin disciples, but he had an inkling those ones might have been gathered by Madam Jin wherever she presumably was plotting revenge in. After all, the woman did so hate having her husband's many indiscretions thrown in her face. While Wen Ruohan would never, ever, bring it up without proof, rumor said that the reason Jin Guangshan kept no concubines was because that woman had poisoned all the ones he did take, refusing to allow any competition for her peacock of a son.

“Father,” Xu-er whispered next to him, and Wen Ruohan turned away from the hilarious events to see his son nod lightly in the direction of his grandson.

Wei Wuxian’s face had settled into a sort of pale rigid blankness that would have looked more at home on a Lan than the normally gregarious teen. He kept glancing between him and Madam Yu, for all appearances not even noticing the commotion at the door.

Ah, poor thing. His whole world had just shifted and he didn’t know what to do or who to listen to right now.

Well, that could quite easily be addressed.

“Enough!” He said firmly, cutting through all the noise. The hall went silent, even the men after Jin Guangshan’s head went silent, though most never looked away from the fool, hatred spewing from their eyes. He was so glad that he’d figured out how to shoot qi from his eyes when he was that mad. Imagine being so weak you could not vent your rage when appropriate.

Like now, for instance.

He smiled again, “it seems like there have been quite a few revelations today.”

His statement caused some grumblings and a few curses, but they all knew better than to speak over the Chief Cultivator. His grin widened, trust his grandson to give him the perfect opportunity to complete his goal of reminding these idiots of their place.

“Jin Guangshan, you will be placed in the Koi Tower dungeons for now while we sort out all the accusations against you. They will be addressed in order of severity after that.” He turned to Nie Mingjue. “Sect Leader Nie, as an apparently uninvolved party, have your disciples guard him and make sure he doesn’t escape.”

The young man scowled, but nodded. “Of course, Sect Leader Wen.”

A man like Jin Guangshan, foolish as he could be, would most likely have all sorts of contingency plans in place for being confined in his own dungeon. There would undoubtedly be all sorts of tricks he had in place to vanish from captivity. And that didn't even take into account that several men fuming to the side of the room would be likely to try and get into the dungeons to kill the idiot rather than risk justice not prevailing. There would also be Madam Jin to contend with as well. The Nie would have to remain hypervigilant, lest they be held accountable for the man escaping justice either by running away or by a quick death.

"Meng Yao," he nodded to his grandson's aide, who in the short time people hadn't been paying attention, had gathered himself.

He smiled perfectly politely at him, bowing. "This humble one awaits his orders, Sect Leader Wen."

"Gather all the accusations against Sect Leader Jin. Gauge their severity and importance. We will need a rough summary this evening, but otherwise rank them by priority and have a full report ready in two days."

"Yes, Sect Leader." He bowed deeply, his smile just this side of predatory as he rose. Good. The last little bit of the young man that wanted that oaf's attention and love had been burned away.

Oh this conference was just perfect.

"It appears that several of us are quite shaken by this morning's revelations. All of today's events will be canceled or moved to another day of the conference. For now, let us disperse to handle any worries within or related to our clans, and the Sect Leaders will reconvene in the evening to begin addressing any inter-sect concerns where an agreement could not be reached."

He received a smattering of grumbles at that, but it appeared that everyone agreed.

"Sect Leader Wen," Lan Qiren's voice carried over the room just as well as his own had earlier, driving the same silence. Well, almost everyone.

"Yes, Lan Qiren?" He acknowledged, taking a bit of joy in condescending to the man for his interruption, especially as he had an inkling about what the man would say.

Sure enough the old goat bristled, glaring at Wei Wuxian. "Sect Leader Wen, I must insist that we address the matter of whoever caused this travesty in the first place."

Wen Ruohan sneered at him, while Wei Wuxian did use the talisman that caused the chaos, Lan Qiren hadn't been here when that came out, meaning that the man just assumed his grandson was at fault.

"Is revealing the truth a travesty?" He asked him.

Lan Qiren's glare shifted to almost murderous, and Wei Wuxian flinched next to him. "Using wicked tricks to harm the innocent is a travesty."

“By Wen reckoning, the one who harmed the innocent was whoever did something so unrighteous it needed to be hidden, not the one that revealed the truth so justice could be brought forth. Do the Lan teach otherwise?” Lan Qiren looked ready to pull his sword there and then, and Wen Ruohan bit back a scoff. So much for the vaulted righteousness and diplomacy of the Lans. They’d always been hypocrites, more often than not holding others to standards they themselves could never meet. But Lan Qiren, oh he would enjoy raking this fool over the coals in the marriage negotiations on top of everything else he had planned for the Cloud Recesses. “Besides, since when have talisman’s been ‘wicked tricks’? Do not the Lan and every other sect use them as well?”

Lan Qiren spluttered in ineffectual rage, looking ready to start screaming before Lan Xichen stepped in front of him, placing a hand against his chest and, oh, that boy had teeth after all, the way he glared his uncle into submission. For all that Lan Qiren handled many of the official duties for the Lan sect in his brother’s stead, as soon as he had come of age Lan Xichen had been named not just as heir, but as acting Sect Leader. Not that he ever did anything with it given the way he kowtowed to his uncle at every step, so softhearted he’s unwilling to make decisions as it would upset someone. It was about time the boy realized that he had a spine. Honoring your elders was all well and good until they started making stupid decisions.

Lan Xichen turned to him and bowed, picture perfect and graceful as Lans always were, though his face resembled his brother’s in how set it was, save for the tension of a clenched jaw and the tightness of rage around his eyes. “This one thanks Sect Leader Wen for his sage words on behalf of his clan, and apologizes for any offense that might have been caused.”

Wen Ruohan tilted his head in acknowledgement. “Of course. Might I suggest that you lead your clan to your rooms to address whatever is upsetting your elder? Lan Qiren is a respected teacher to many, one would hate to see him lose face due to any rash actions.”

Lan Xichen bowed again.

Wen Ruohan clapped his hands, “well, unless anyone else has something to say, I think we should disperse to handle what we can before tonight’s discussion. Sect Leader Jiang, a word.”

Everyone who were shuffling off froze, a certain amount of fear among those that now knew who exactly Wei Wuxian was.

“Sect Leader Wen,” the man nodded, having already sheathed his sword as several Nie disciples had surrounded Jin Guangshan, taking custody. Oh the glares pointed in their direction by that mob... Priceless!

“Your wife had the gall to hit my grandson in front of me.” The man’s eyes flew wide, quickly locking onto Wei Wuxian, clarity dawning on him over why he’d been showing such interest in the boy even though he hadn’t been there to see the strand of spiritual energy himself. “Her hand, I think, would make an appropriate show of good will to buy you the time you need to work out further restitution on your own, before I decide what payment would suit best myself.”

## Chapter End Notes

I hope that didn't disappoint?

You amazing people kept throwing out awesome ideas in the comments and I was like, oh god, should I just have Wen Ruohan burn everything to the ground? I tried to balance the idea of saving face/paying difference to status with what we've seen of certain characters tendency to make stupid decisions in the heat of the moment that lead to them hyper focusing on whatever is pissing them off and ignoring everything else, especially the consequences, along with the sects tendency towards mob mentality, but I feel it got a little too stupid/almost bashy in a few spots... Meh... I tried.

On the Lans, Madam Lan's imprisonment always sat wrong with me. Like, we don't see/hear much about her in canon, but what we do see makes it feel like there had to be some reason she hauled off and killed a Lan elder. She didn't seem the type to murder for the funsies. I've read a couple of fics where one or both of the Twin Jades are the results of rape, which I agree is a likely possibility and headcanon more often than not. There have also been a few fics where they are half brothers because of that fact, so I decided to go in that direction. I hope it made sense within the context of this story.

ADDITIONAL EDIT: I fixed an error I had in this section in the fic, so that now reads a bit different post edit.

Also, for Wei Wuxian and Madam Yu being related, well, I asked myself what would piss Madam Yu off the most, and kinda went with that.

Anyway, fingers crossed that you enjoyed this! :)

Color codes :)

Child/Parent = Orange

Full blood siblings = White

Half Siblings = Gold

Child/Uncle or Aunt = Green

Child/Grandparent = Red

Child/Grand Uncle/Aunt = Purple

Child/First Cousin = Yellow

Child/First Cousin Once removed = Pink

Child/Second Cousin = Gray

Anyone notice how Wei Wuxian unconsciously/on purpose coded a few lines? White for the Lan brothers (oops), Gold for the many Jin half siblings (and hey Nie Huaisang wouldn't mind a gold thread connecting him to his Dajie since the Nie used gold accents so it wouldn't clash with his robes), Orange for parent/child so it would definitely stand out against purple and prove his purple clad adopted sibs were Jiang Fengmian's only kids... etc. :)

## Family reveals

Note 1: Only people in range of the talisman are linked, so for example even though Wen Chao is Wen Ruohan's son, since he is not in range of the talisman there isn't a line for him.

Note 2: since this is a handwave/magic talisman, it shows all degrees of blood relation. IE if a pair of kids are siblings and cousins, they'd have both lines.

Wei Wuxian - Wei Wuxian has 3 lines, Red to his grandfather Wen Ruohan, Green to his uncle Wen Xu, and grey showing Madam Yu is his 2nd cousin, which means he and Madam Yu share a great grandparent. As the talisman only goes back 3 gen, 2nd cousins are the farthest it will show so Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli are 1 generation too far.

Jins - Meng Yao and Jin Zixuan both have a large number of gold lines showing they have a huge amount of half siblings. This shows with Jin Zixun too, he has a large number of yellow stands (1st cousins) including Meng Yao and Jin Zixuan. They have a few other assorted lines showing additional family members like grand uncles/aunts, 1st cousins once removed, and 2nd cousins, though all within the expected range of a 'gentry' family.

Wens - Wen Ruohan saw lines connecting him to Wen Xu (Orange), Wei Wuxian (Red), Wen Qing (Gray), and Wen Ning (Gray), which were all expected.

Nie - Nie Huaisang and Nie Mingjue are half siblings (known) and have several 2nd cousins (shared great-grandparents) which they also knew.

Jiangs - Aside from Wei Ying being connected to Madam Yu, Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli are full blooded sibs with Jiang Fengmian and Madam Yu as their parents. There were a few strands leading to 1st cousins once removed and 2nd cousins that I headcannon think existed prior to the canon attack on Lotus Pier.

Lans - Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji had a gold line showing they are half siblings, and also a pink line showing they are 1st cousins once removed (one of their parents was the great uncle/aunt of the other). Lan Wangji's green line to Lan Qiren showed they are nephew/uncle, however the line between Lan Qiren and Lan Xichen showed that they are 1st cousins (they had bio parents that were siblings). Lan Qiren also had lines leading to 2nd cousins.

The women + kids: The 4 women were full blooded sisters (white line) married to Jin disciples. They got SA'd by JGS so the kids are both half siblings and cousins, and the lines between them that they have both parents and aunts in the mix (with an additional orange line leading to Koi Tower for JGS). The guys being idiots attacked the women for 'infidelity' because they're saf and assumed they slept with JGS willing.



# Chapter Seven

## Chapter Notes

So... hi? Sorry this took so long to get out.

A bunch of the scenes got away from me, so it's like double the size I intended it to be and I gave up and glossed over a few things just to finish it... I hope it's worth the delay?

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Wen Ruohan smiled in the silence of the hall after his request for the bitch's limb. It felt immensely satisfying to see Yu Ziyuan turn so purple she nearly matched her robes just as Jiang Fengmian turned so white he nearly matched the snowy robes of his grandson's crush.

Ah, so satisfying.

"Sect Leader Wen," Jiang Fengmian started, only to cut himself off, obviously trying to gather his words.

Not that Wen Ruohan would let him.

"Did I not inform you that I expected to only ever see my grandson uninjured and happy? That I expected you to keep that haridan in line when it came to him? Is so simple a task as managing your household beyond you?"

His words echoed in the silence of the room, and he took no small amount of joy in the way that he saw several people look down on Jiang Fengmian, even if they themselves had no room to talk. After all, he didn't think there was a single family, aside from maybe the Nie, that hadn't had some type of surprise discovered today. His spies had better have a full list for him by today's later meeting if they knew what was good for them. Meng Yao would be too busy managing the complaints against Jin Guangshan to handhold them, so it would be a good test of how far they had come.

"These ones will remove themselves from what appears to be an internal matter," Lan Xichen stated before Jiang Fengmian could say anything else. He turned and inclined his head to the young acting sect leader. His grandson's crush looked particularly mulish next to him, his eyes locked on Wei Wuxian, but did not appear willing to stand against his brother quite yet. Lan Qiren didn't look happy either, but it seemed more directed at his oldest nephew. The boy normally presented as a sterling example of Lan qualities by playing the peacemaker, and in fact was a deft hand at mediating disputes. Such a shame that his skill seemed to end at cooling flared tempers as the placating decisions he made in the moment rarely led to actual change or long term solutions.

“The Nie will leave as well,” Nie Mingjue stated quickly, still looking worriedly at Lan Xichen while his little brother looked almost smugly between the two, for one that cared to look beyond the falsely nervous fluttering of his fan. Hmm, he would need to reassess who exactly among the Nie was the more troublesome of the two if what he’d seen of the boy yesterday and today was any indication.

“Of course, this one wishes both Lan and Nie success in dealing with the matters ahead of them,” Wen Ruohan smirked.

Both of them murmured the appropriate platitudes before bowing out, all but one of each of their sects following them out, undoubtedly left to watch and report on the proceedings.

Many of the other smaller sects all left as well, even if they were nominally allied with the Jiang, Jin, or the Yu, obviously wanting to be out of the line of fire if Wen Ruohan was on the war path, which he was. This day had opened up so many opportunities, and he would grasp every single one of them.

When the exodus was completed, he turned back to Jiang Fengmian, who had seemed to be silently conversing with his wife while everything else went on. Not that it appeared they had come to a consensus.

Madam Yu still appeared unapologetic, her face set, while Jiang Fengmian looked like a cornered mouse. Wen Ruohan would happily eat them both alive.

Eventually, the man sighed. “Sect Leader Wen, I appreciate your concern for the wellbeing of this one’s first disciple-”

“How could I not show concern, as Wei Wuxian is this one’s precious grandson. To see the wife of his sect leader harm him so thoughtlessly in return for accomplishments that should be heralded for the incredible innovation it causes me great pain. My grandson deserves better, does he not?”

Jiang Fengmian just looked resigned, closing his eyes and sighing inaudibly, finally giving a subdued nod. “He does.”

“While he may be your grandson,” the woman nearly spat, far more controlled than she’d been earlier, though still blatantly furious, but still highly dismissive of the wonder Wei Wuxian had pulled off today. He wondered if she was so angry at her husband she had prioritized that over her feelings towards him. From what he could gather though, it seemed clear she did not think that he really meant to cut off her hand.

Which Wen Ruohan felt odd, as he’d been fairly obvious that he intended to ultimately see her dead.

He just wanted to see if Jiang Fengmian had some hope of smartening up, and could remain as head of the Jiang in Lotus Pier after he established the supervisory office there, or if he’d need to end the man and replace him with his son. The Jiang heir was definitely headstrong and foolish, and would undoubtedly want revenge for what he perceived as a slight against his family rather than removing intractable leaders that would hurt their people by defying

him just as Nie Mingjue did, but in between Meng Yao and Jiang Yanli managing the brat for Wei Wuxian, he didn't doubt the boy would calm down and see reason eventually. After all he had to have some sense if his two siblings cared so much for him.

He didn't want to upset his grandson by killing Jiang Wanyin since he was so attached to him.

"Wei Wuxian belongs to the Jiang sect. How we handle our disciples is an internal matter." Madam Yu finished. He scowled. She'd used the same excuse earlier, nearly word for word. Did she not realize that he didn't care if sect discipline was normally an internal matter? Wei Wuxian was of his blood, and the only person that could hope to punish or harm a Wen was him. And his grandson did not deserve any punishment anyway.

"Ah yes, I meant to address that as well. While I am appreciative that you took my grandson in, Sect Leader Jiang, I feel that the best place for him is with the Wen. It is obvious that for all his affection for the Jiang Sect, his skills and talents are," he tilted his head, "rotting there." Jiang Fengmian set his jaw tightly, a knowing sort of acceptance in his eyes. "Though Wei Wuxian's father once served the Jiang, it is my understanding that he left the sect. Given Cangse Sanren is my daughter, and Wei Changze had no living family, it would be remiss of me to not take in her son if he is not thriving in his current position. After all, was it not the Wen that first stated sects should behold families first?"

The room remained silent at his words. He grinned toothily at Jiang Fengmian. "I am sure, that aside from her hand, you can factor in all the," he deliberately dragged his gaze over the bitch from foot to head, paying special attention to that spiritual weapon of hers, "various actions and contributions of everyone involved when you decide on the restitution for the shameful behavior of your sect towards my grandson."

"Sect Leader Wen," Jiang Yanli interjected, stepping forward with the type of picture perfect bow Wei Wuxian was capable of when he wanted, and he smiled kindly as he finally realized where his grandson picked up that behavior from. To her side, the Jiang heir looked positively terrified, like he wanted to gather up his sister and hide her behind him at the same time as he wanted to join her in trying to interject on his mother's behalf. "This humble one appreciates your point, but wonders if perhaps the Jiang might have some time to discuss things?"

"Lady Jiang," he nodded politely. "I agree that time is needed. I would hate for the Jiang to feel that whatever restitution provided to the Wen for the damage done to my grandson is unjust, after all. As far as I am concerned, nothing short of her life would be true recompense." Jiang Fengmian just hung his head, looking fatalistically passive at his words, while Madam Yu finally realized the danger she was in, her teeth gritting and the type of outrage so common on the faces of the self-important ones when they finally realized they weren't nearly as untouchable as they thought painting her features. "However, as I hold family most dear, I understand that it would pain not just her children, but Wei Wuxian as well due to his care for the sect that raised him. That is why I will accept her hand for now while your father takes time to determine what is best for your sect." He smiled at the man. It wasn't a kind one. "For your family."

While her face appeared perfectly calm, if a little downcast, he felt highly amused by how Jiang Yanli's eyes appeared happy. She bowed her head again politely, and when it rose, there was not a hint left in her gaze that she felt anything other than sadness and filial piety. She seemed the picture of the model daughter even as she stepped back, carefully, deliberately taking her brother's arm. It left her perfectly positioned to restrain him in the guise of seeking comfort.

Oh, she was exquisite. He thought back to the idea of marrying her to Wen Qionglin. That really would be an ideal solution. Hmm, perhaps he could offer the marriage during the negotiations over restitution?

"Sect Leader Wen!" Wei Wuxian stated to his side, and he turned to his grandson. The boy looked lost and more than a little scared. "Such a thing is not needed for such a-

"Ah, A-Xian, don't worry." He patted his cheek again. "Your grandfather will make sure that you receive fair recompense."

"I took no offense so I see no reason for recompense!" Wei Wuxian pleaded quickly.

"You are too forgiving, grandson, which is why I shall take offense for you."

"Bu-

"Hush," he tapped Wei Wuxian's head. "Though the day is early, it's been quite a tiring one for you. Xu-er, see your nephew to our rooms while I deal with this matter, would you?"

"I'm fi-

"Come with me, A-Xian," Xu-er grabbed Wei Wuxian's arm to pull him away, even as Jiang Yanli smiled sadly at Wei Wuxian.

"It's okay, A-Xian," she stated consolingly, pulling her brother after her as she went to follow them. "I am sure things will be fine." She turned to her parents and bowed, hauling the Jiang heir down by the arm with her. "These ones will leave as well, so as not to impede the discussions."

"A-Jie!" Jiang Wanyin hissed. But she shushed him with a look.

"That's a good idea, you all should go rest," Jiang Fengmian stated softly, finally opening his eyes to look not just at his children, but at Wei Wuxian as well. None of them moved, A-Xian and Jiang Wanyin both leaning hard against the people trying to usher them out. "Sect Leader Wen, I do believe we should handle this in private."

His eyes narrowed. "Sect Leader Jiang, as your wife certainly did not bother keeping her irrational displeasure with my grandson private, I fail to see the need to do so myself. Though, I will allow you to send the children away so they do not need to see their mother in pain, even if it would do them good to see justice be done."

Jiang Fengmian bit his lip, before nodding resolutely at his children and Wei Wuxian. "Out, all of you," he reiterated.

Jiang Wanyin still needed to be dragged by his sister and two of the other Jiang disciples that moved to assist her, but Wei Wuxian practically collapsed against Xu-er, who hauled him from the room like a sack of rice, his son's group of followers circling them in a viciously protective wall.

Good.

He turned back to the Jiangs, finally able to really take enjoyment as the bitch at long last seemed to realize that nothing she could do would save her.

Oh, his precious, precious grandson. What amazing gifts the boy gave him. Watching the idiot who had stolen so many of his years with his grandson have to cut off the harridan's arm was even better than doing so himself.

"Well?" He asked Jiang Fengmian. "I'm waiting."

XxXxX

Wen Xu kept a firm grip on A-Xian as they trailed the Jiang siblings through the crowds of disciples that had just vacated the main hall for the side ones, either wanting to eavesdrop on the drama or to discuss things in a fake semblance of privacy.

He couldn't help but smile as they went, and not just because the idiots looked properly terrified of him.

A-Xian was his nephew!

A-Xian had been theirs since his father decided it, but to know that A-Xian was their blood as well made a part of him he hadn't known existed practically sing. He resisted the urge to pet A-Xian's hair again where he slumped against his side.

Suddenly all the stories his minions told of adorable younger siblings and relatives made sense in a way it never did for the disgusting oaf Wen Chao. A-Xian deserved to be spoiled and cuddled and be treated like the scion of the Wen clan that he was, not like the mere servant of another, much more pathetic clan.

Even if their daughter appeared to have half a brain given the way she comported herself. A-Xian was certainly right to hold her in such esteem, and Father seemed to be fond of her earlier in the main hall as well.

Said Jiang girl was currently keeping a tight hold on her petulant toddler of a brother who practically spit and hissed as she dragged him along with her, two Jiang disciples bookending him silently while she gave tight smiles and head nods to those they passed in the hall who looked less than happy. Just over halfway down the hall though, she paused and her brother and the two Jiang disciples stopped at her heels like well trained dogs. The Jiang daughter gave a bow to a woman in bright yellow robes with intricate embroidery with a slightly upturned nose and a pinched look on her face. At the bow the woman's eyes softened, and she bowed back, though far less differentially.

“Madam Bai, could this humble one impose on you to send messengers to all the sects and inform them of the change in today’s schedule? I worry that with so many of the Jin sequestered or involved in today’s happenings, the smaller sect’s disciples too far from the Tower will be unaware and appear for events that will not take place.”

The woman looked even more soft at that and nodded, “Ah, of course Jiang-gūniang.” She shook her head. “So much chaos with you poor children caught in the middle, and still you think of others, what a good girl. Why, I always told your mother she needed to mind her temper, but she never listened to the good advice of others, did she.”

Jiang Yanli merely gave another bow, a sad smile on her face, her eyes watering in a way that made her seem to be barely holding it together. Wen Xu couldn’t help but smirk as he saw her nails dig into her brother’s arm as the Jiang heir bristled. Ahh, it was good, he supposed, that even with his parents’ failures the Jiang heir remained loyal. The little show seemed to set the tone for the spikes of gossip that started throughout the hall, though.

*“-sad, to have and fail such wonderful children-”*

*“-filial duty, didn’t they? To still honor their parents th-”*

*“-did always think his interest in his first disciple was odd, wasn’t it? With how much he loved the boy’s mother-”*

*“-the first thing Wei Wuxian declared? That he’d known his mother was faithful to his father despite what Madam Yu accused them of?”*

*“-see? Madam Yu had a thread to him! She hurt her birth family over false jealousy! Who knows what the damage to such a sterling young cultivator would have been if Sect Leader Wen didn’t step-”*

Jiang Yanli let the whispers continue as she demurred to the woman. “Our worries seem so small compared to what the poor Jins must be going through! We had heard and discarded rumors that Sect Leader Jin was so unrighteous based on our trust in the friendship between Mother and Madam Jin, but to see the proof of his depravity!” She brought the hand not holding onto Jiang Wanyin like an iron band fluttering up to hide her lips, the tears welling up again.

Jiang Wanyin looked ready to commit murder at her tears, and at his side A-Xian made a keening whine, pulling in her direction. After a moment of thought, Wen Xu let A-Xian go to her, trailing after amusedly.

“Shijie! Shijie! Don’t cry! Your Xianxian’s sorry! He didn’t mean anything he did to make you cry!” He fluttered around her, wringing his hands.

Jiang Wanyin turned his murderous glare on A-Xian, smacking him over the head. The only reason Wen Xu decided not to remove the hand was because of how light the smack was and the fact that Wei Wuxian, for all that he started whining and patting his head, obviously wasn’t in actual pain. “Ahh! A-Cheng! So mean to your poor Shixiong when he’s just trying to apologize!”

“Now isn’t the time for your act! You’ll just upset A-Jie more!” Jiang Cheng snapped.

“You two. There are more important things to worry about!” She sniffled, a trembling smile on her face. “Just think of everything that needs to be done! Even with Madam Bai’s kind assistance notifying the outlying sects, some here in the Tower may not have heard of the postponements. And we heard so many fights, the healers would have prepared for minor injuries, not battles! And so many children must be so scared! And their Mothers! All the poor women that Jin Gaungshan forced that hid it from shame just had everything pushed into the open! What if their husbands don’t understand?”

She almost burst into artful tears again, sending both of the two teens scrambling to reassure her, A-Xian fluttering around her while also failing at not looking completely devastated in a way that had Wen Xu’s heart aching just a bit. Jiang Wanyin seemed to forget their audience enough that he threatened to break Jun Gaungshan’s legs for being a disgusting monster that made his sister cry among other varied threats that had Wen Xu appreciating his creativity. It figured A-Xian liked the Jiang heir for a reason!

Meanwhile her teary words set the rest of the crowd into another flurry of tittering words, all aimed at Jin Gaungshan being a reprehensible beast, that of course the husbands would understand as this was not the normal case of an improper woman leading a man on. Wen Xu bit his lips tightly, trying not to laugh at how easily the Jiang girl managed to twist the crowd, especially in the direction of something so against the useless social conventions he found so annoying.

Wen Xu arranged his continence into a calm mask and stepped forward when he could not stand the look on Wei Wuxian’s face any further. He patted his nephew HIS ADORABLE NEPHEW on the head. “Don’t worry, A-Xian, if anything happens you don’t like, we can fix it.”

A-Xian turned to stare at him, seeming a little lost for a moment before Jiang Yanli bowed deeply to him, a trembling smile on her face as she lightly laid a hand on A-Xian’s arm. “This humble one thanks Young Master Wen for his magnanimous offer! Oh A-Xian, isn’t that great that the Wen are so honorable to help the victims of this despicable case!”

That wasn’t what he meant, but before he could clarify, the lost look on A-Xian’s face transformed into a grin so bright it was nearly blinding.

“Ah! Really, A-Xu? That’s what you meant! Thank you!” A-Xian grasped Wen Xu’s arms and practically spun him around in glee. “I was so worried about all the women and babies! I knew that sleazeball had a few illegitimate kids that he didn’t treat right with how poorly he and Madam Jin acted towards A-Yao but I didn’t think there’d be so many women he’d forced like that! I thought it would just be a few more poor, deceived brothel workers like A-Yao’s mother that I knew I could help.”

Wen Xu just nodded. Helping even the ridiculous number of women involved with Jin Gaungshan wouldn’t be any type of strain on the Wen sect, and if the brats turned out even a quarter as well as Meng Yao, the time and effort would pay dividends. “Anything that you want, A-Xian.” Jiang Yanli gently pulled A-Xian away from him, and they both gave a quick bow again, this time followed by the rest of the sheep in the hall.

“Jia Enlai,” he waved at his assistant. The man quickly scurried forward, bowing. “Let Meng Yao know that any women and children he deems to be in unstable positions will be welcomed by the Wen, and help him make any arrangements.”

“Yes, Young Master!” The man bowed again and moved to rush off.

“Wait,” he stated, and the man froze. “Is there anything else that you’d like to see done, A-Xian? Knowing Wen Qing she’s already gathered all our people with even an ounce of training to assist the healers, but the rest are available.”

His nephew actually sparkled at him, and grabbed his upper arms to spin him around again as he laughed. “A-Xu! You’re incredible! I owe you so much.”

Wen Xu shook his head. “You don’t owe me.”

A-Xian frowned. “But-”

Jiang Yanli stepped forward, distracting A-Xian as she bowed again. “The compassion and generosity of the Wen during this upheaval is truly something the rest of us should aspire to emulate!”

The woman that Jiang Yanli had pulled in earlier, Madam Bai, quickly echoed the sentiment, bowing as well. Several more followed suit and the whispers around them grew again.

*“-sense, the Wen recently started that shoo-”*

*“-enforced those rules on the brothels in their territory-”*

*“-more than honorable! To think of looking past such shame!”*

*“-Leader Wen was so decisive about making sure justice was done!”*

*“-so kind to the Jiang even given the dishonorable behavior-”*

*“-really wouldn’t have been a big deal if the Jin weren’t so deplorable!”*

Jiang Yanli calmly ignored the ruckus around them, drawing Madam Bai and some of the other ladies into a conversation with Jia Enlai. Several people from various sects were dispatched to gather as many junior disciples and servants as possible so that tasks could be divided up.

Wen Xu took the time to gather the remaining Wen disciples present and work with A-Xian on where he and his little co-conspirators thought they could use some extra hands to keep the peace. The Jiang heir quickly joined them, his two minders on his heels. A few others attached themselves to them as well, including some heirs from smaller sects and a good handful of senior disciples from the midsize and major sects.

As irritated as Wen Xu started to get at the amount of dithering and discussion that the increased numbers caused, he felt equally happy watching A-Xian interject masterfully to confuse or redirect people whenever he was about to snap or whenever the Jiang heir’s face



got particularly pinched at something stupid someone said. The amusement from watching Jiang Wanyin kept growing to the point that Wen Xu idly wondered if he could find a way to make his face so crumpled up it looked like a steamed bun.

The brat seemed to have a puffed up but fragile ego, maybe he could insult... He blinked. Huh, weirdly as he thought about it, A-Xian hadn't really told him much about the Jiang heir, and definitely not enough to pick a targeted insult very quickly. He knew that the boy could be temperamental, and A-Xian tended to enjoy riling him up, but the specifics of how he'd done it had been left rather vague. He felt torn between pride that A-Xian managed to withhold so much information without him realizing it and annoyance that A-Xian wanted to protect someone who wasn't really family.

And no, he did not count that spider bitch as A-Xian's family even with that thread. She had forfeited any right to the preciousness that was Wen Xu's nephew.

Luckily her children seemed much better. Not only did A-Xian care for them, but Jiang Yanli seemed quite adept to gain father's approval, while Jiang Wanyin had the same low tolerance for idiots that Wen Xu himself had, especially when it came to the Yao.

"If the Yao are unable to accommodate the victims of Jin Gaungshan that reside in their territory in a respectable manner, the Jiang will gladly take them," the amusing brat spat at the fool before A-Xian could interject after the thoughtless comment about the type of work the women would be suited for by the Yao's sect heir, his tone just barely short of insulting.

Wen Xu barely stopped a snort of laughter as A-Xian quickly shifted just a tad so he stood between the two heirs, redirecting the angle of the group to Jiang Yanli's smile, her attention obviously drawn by her brother's loud statement. "Young Master Yao! The Jiang humbly apologizes! Ever since the incident with that snake yao we knew that your forces were stretched, we shouldn't have been so thoughtless as to assume you could accommodate people without warning!" She bowed from where she stood, looking absolutely contrite in a way Wen Xu just knew she didn't actually feel. Sure enough he bit back a smile as he listened to the slight uptick in whispers directed negatively at the Yao.

The man sputtered until Wen Xu smiled at him, causing him to pale and go silent. "You should return to your inn and make sure your people don't need anything before the conference since you're so short handed."

The man quickly bowed and rushed out, several others following him. Jiang Wanyin rolled his eyes, perfectly echoing what Wen Xu was thinking.

Jiang Yanli turned swiftly, drawing the attention of the room away from the scampering insects. She grinned, not quite brightly but in a way that made it seem like she wanted nothing more than to keep up face.

"Well, I believe the most important things have been addressed, though Madam Bai, would you mind if I relied on you later today to reassess things? As much as I fear causing Madam Jin even more distress by interfering with whatever plans she might have for this evening, I worry that she won't be able to extract herself from where she's helping those of her sect to manage the last minute details. If there is anything that we can do to ensure her staff are well

directed, I must at least try!” She sniffled, tears welling at the corners of her bright doe eyes. “Oh, she must be so distraught! To lock herself up in her rooms even to the point of disregarding her duties as hostess!”

Wen Xu barely held back a bark of laughter as a million thoughts and calculations flew across the older woman’s face. Wen Xu might not be married or have any close female relatives aside from the rather atypical Wen Qing, but even he knew the absolute importance ladies of a certain rank put on their ability to welcome and host guests well. The rotating group of highly ranked women that father relied on to plan events and manage certain aspects of his home could be downright vicious when it came to gathering luxurious ingredients or particularly in demand entertainment. His former sister-in-law, Zhao Jiaying, had been especially cutthroat. While no one had been able to prove that she arranged for the Yo’s manor to burn down after the first young lady beat her to booking a renowned orator, well, she’d been smug enough when the man performed at her flower viewing party that there wasn’t anyone else it could have been.

Given the upheaval of this conference, the chances ran high of there being problems when all the sect leaders and other high ranking cultivators gathered back together this evening per father’s orders. It would be exceedingly difficult, but if someone could pull off making it go at least relatively smoothly, he didn’t doubt that it would be some type of incredible social coup. The woman obviously decided the same thing, huffing and pulling herself up to try and look superior. “Of course! If the righteous sects don’t step up in this trying time, who else will!”

Jiang Yanli let her grin grow just a bit. “Absolutely! I can think of no one better to spearhead our efforts! Your dinners are famous even in Yunming! There is still so much we need to do, and while the Jiang’s are willing t-”

A scoff interrupted her. Wen Xu raised an eyebrow at the man who actually dared to look at Jiang Yanli dismissively. Why did some people need to be so thoughtlessly obtuse? Couldn’t he see that the girl had made herself the center of positive attention in the room? Didn’t he see his father’s and A-Xian’s obvious care and appreciation of her? The stupidity...

“Perhaps, Young Mistress Jiang, someone with your level of skill should focus on your own clan’s affairs today, and leave hosting righteous sects to those suited for it.”

Hmm, if he wasn’t mistaken the imbecile came from the Yueyang Chang clan. He knew his father had plans for them, but perhaps they could be re-worked in order to wipe them out?

“You dare insult my sister in front of me?” The Jiang heir snapped at the worm, and the two Jiang disciples that’d been hanging back latched onto his arms at the exact same time Wen Xu grabbed A-Xian, preventing him from launching himself forward. As creative as A-Xian could be, this type of revenge would be better served later at Wen Xu and his father’s hands. It would be more final that way.

In the meantime, all of the ladies in the hall looked ready to follow their lead and tear the man’s eyes out, which of course made the rest of the men stare at him like the disgusting bug he was.

Jiang Yanli shifted in a manner that could have been accidental if it weren't for the sharpness of her smile as she turned her back on the idiot, though the tears welling in her eyes increased, deliberately excluding him. "As stated, I believe that the immediate tasks have been addressed. We can all break until after lunch when we see what else needs to be done to ensure the sect leaders have everything they need in order to be able to discuss things civilly this evening."

A chorus of approvals rang throughout the hall, and the man didn't even deign to look as ashamed as he should.

The admiration A-Xian had for Jiang Yanli really was well deserved.

"Young Lady Jiang is truly as kindhearted and considerate as she is beautiful." Wen Xu stated aloud before he realized it. He blinked, which gave A-Xian the opening to slip his grip to practically teleport across the hall to hold back the enraged Jiang heir that just slipped the tight hold of his guards to start lunging at him. Not that it stopped his nephew from looking torn between shock and excited approval of his words about his favorite Shijie.

The way the young woman met his eyes resolutely, fearlessly past her brother and A-Xian, the way her lips twitched as she tried to hide a smile, how gracefully a tear trailed down her cheek...

"This humble one does not deserve such praise from someone as kind as Young Master Wen, as he is the one that showed such great kindness by agreeing to help all the poor victims of Jin Guangshan. Especially given the way our mother-" she sniffled, causing the entire hall to burst into reassuring words.

A warmth similar to the feeling that A-Xian caused bloomed in his chest, and all of a sudden it hit him over the head what that likely meant.

And because of that there was only one real option given their statuses.

"Marry me?" Wen Xu asked Jiang Yanli.

Everyone in the hallway went silent and stared at him, only for Jiang Yanli to break the silence with a strained laugh, her face lighting up despite the crocodile tears still glistening in her eyes.

Yes, he wanted more of this warmth, of caring, and if she married him he'd get it all the time, and chances are any children they had would be incredible and cause the feeling too. A-Xian would love spending more time with her, and he'd adore their children.

It really would make everything perfect.

Jiang Wanyin practically keened from where A-Xian was holding him, now looking quite a bit flabbergasted himself. Oh, that would absolutely be a bonus too! The two Jiangs that were actually worthy of A-Xian's care would be family so there would no longer be any chance of A-Xian being torn between loyalties! And if Jiang Wanyin became his brother-in-law, he'd get to harass him for life! It would be more fun than poking at Nie Mingjue!

“This humble one is honored by your request, Young Master Wen,” she bowed lightly, smiling quite prettily. “However it is very sudden and this one believes the current troubles should be resolved first before such happy matters are considered.”

“Right,” he said. Father needed to finish off her mother first, and her father also needed to pay for his foolishness. “I’ll wait to ask you again.”

“Ask again!?” Jiang Wanyin shrieked before A-Xian could get a hand over his mouth. The feral thing bit his nephew to get it released so he could continue, a waspish, angry glare on his face. How adorable! “You haven’t even courted my A-jie! You haven’t spent time with her or given her all the compliments she deserves or presented her flowers or sweets or jewels or combs or asked our Father or anything! If you’re not any better than the peacock why would she marry you!”

Wen Xu stared at the practically spitting sect heir, trying to figure out why those little things mattered when all the women he knew viewed marriage itself as they goal, only for A-Xian to make a considering noise, and he turned to stare at his nephew who, after a few moments thought, nodded. “Yup, even if it was an arranged marriage, he at least sent her the traditional gifts, though that was probably his mother.”

He suddenly felt horrified as he realized that if they both agreed, and the muttering of the crowd seemed to agree, it was likely true. The Jin brat of all people was better than him at something! This could not stand. Jiang Yanli broke the sudden tension with a giggle. “A-Cheng, A-Xian, if I am unhappy with whoever is courting me I will say so.”

“But you were too nice to with the peacock even when he insulted you!” A-Xian whined. “That’s why I had to punch him!”

“He’s right,” Wen Xu stated. “As is Jiang Wanyin.” Jiang Wanyin looked like a feral cat ready to claw his eyes out for all that Wen Xu just agreed with him. Despite the situation he felt half tempted to dangle something fluttery over his head and see if he’d jump. “My timing was poor and you should be treated with all due courtesy.” He grinned as she bowed her head again politely, a small, genuine smile on her face. “Though, is it presumptuous of me to assume that you’d care more if I got your brothers’ permissions rather than your father’s?”

A-Xian barely managed to hold back Jiang Wanyin while Jiang Yanli laughed again, uncaring of the firestorm of words that had started around them.

XxXxX

Nie Mingjue didn’t say anything as he rushed after Lan Xichen. His little brother, if he knew what was good for him, would be working with Nie Zonghui to get that damned fool Jin Guangshan safely locked away. After all that little shit was partially responsible for this. He hadn’t doubted it in the hall with Huaisang’s faked surprise, especially given that his disciples had been mysteriously spread out around Koi Tower and the surrounding area prior to the talisman being used.

He needed to see his best friend and learn if he could do anything to help with whatever disaster his brother and his chaos gremlin friends caused for his own best friend.

Because his brother, for all his good intentions and brains, could be an absolute idiot sometimes. Not that Nie Mingjue realized how bad this latest little scheme would be. He'd seen how annoyed A-Sang had been getting at the Jins, so figured it would be better to allow him to vent some of his frustrations now, especially as he'd been fretting over whatever had Wen Ruohan so interested in Wei Wuxian. He just hadn't anticipated the sheer scale of what that trio of nightmares decided to get up to.

Did it not occur to any of those idiots about the collateral damage they'd cause? They'd obviously figured something would happen due to spreading around what people they could in case things went wrong, but did it not occur to them that there were other sects at Koi Tower other than the Jin?

Other people they could hurt?

Normally he'd be able to trust A-Huan to be able to gather what support he needed for internal matters from his uncle or brother, but whatever got revealed caused the Lan heir to be damn near actively hostile to Lan Qiren, and Lan Wangji, hardly good at comforting others on the best day, seemed just as off kilter.

"Lan Xichen!" He called before his friend could disappear into his rooms with his brother, uncle, and three of the other Lan elders in attendance. He vaguely recognized them from somewhere, so they were probably important, but he didn't care to remember why when A-Huan appeared ready to cry though he was doing a fair imitation of Lan Wangji's stoneface while Lan Wangji himself looked ready to take a sword to someone if he was reading him right.

While he didn't think of Lan Wangji as the adorably misunderstood fluffball that needed to be coddled as his brother did, he'd never really thought of him as violently obstinate before.

A-Huan turned back to face him, obviously trying to gather himself. "I need a moment of your time," Nie Mingjue told him. "It's horrid timing, I know, but it's about Huaisang starting this mess."

His best friend swallowed, closing his eyes for a moment and visibly pulling himself together.

"Use my room," Lan Wangji stated, pointing to the door next to the one they were all piling in. "There are silencing talismans. We will wait." With that, the normally prim and proper Second Jade turned back to his uncle and elders and glared them into A-Huan's room before any of them could say anything, though Lan Qiren looked quite tempted to.

"Thank you!" He called to the boy before grabbing A-Huan and pulling him into the room, shutting the door behind them and quickly triggering the silencing talismans with a flick of spiritual energy. He faced A-Huan and grabbed his shoulders, meeting his eyes carefully. "What can I do to help you?"

A-Huan's face crumpled followed by the rest of him and he collapsed against Nie Mingjue's chest. He froze before gathering his friend into his arms like he'd do A-Sang whenever his brother had a nightmare.

“It’s okay, I promise, whatever it is, I’m here.”

He and A-Huan had been friends since practically before they could walk, having met and grown attached to each other at some conference or another. There had been constant visits back and forth to see each other whenever their schedules allowed it and someone was available to take them. They’d practiced their letters and calligraphy by writing to each other constantly, bonding over what they could about being sect heirs and eventually older brothers.

The first person he’d sparred with after his father when he’d gotten Baxia was A-Huan.

When Wen Ruohan murdered his father and he’d taken over his sect, the first person Nie Mingjue could share his burden with was A-Huan.

His first wet dream, his first love, and his first everything had been A-Huan.

He knew that the other felt the same as they shared lingering touches, longing looks, and unconditional support. They both knew and understood they couldn’t say anything, that their responsibilities to their families, to their clans and sects would forever keep them from being together, but that didn’t change that they loved each other more than anyone else aside from their brothers.

That they were the only ones they could show any weakness to without losing face.

A-Huan shook in his arms, small, hiccuping sobs leaving him, while Nie Mingjue carefully rubbed his back. A-Sang would be doing drills for days for this.

After long enough that his friend’s tears trailed off, A-Huan whispered something he couldn’t make out into his chest, the words muffled by his robes.

“Hmm?” He asked quietly, not wanting to push A-Huan unless he actually wanted to talk.

“They lied,” A-Huan stated louder, pulling back from him, releasing his death grip on Nie Mingjue’s robes to rub his hands over his face, trying futilely to remove the traces of tears from his cheeks.

“Who did?” Nie Mingjue prompted as he carefully removed A-Huan’s hands and used the cuff of his own long formal sleeves to clean the pale, perfect face before him, trailing his fingers lightly over the breathtakingly soft skin under his eyes, using a wisp of spiritual power to sooth the puffiness, returning A-Huan to his jade-like complexion rather than looking like an adorable red berry.

“Everyone,” A-Huan hissed, finally meeting his eyes looking angrier than he’d ever seen the other. “They all lied to us.”

Nie Mingjue swallowed. “About what?” A-Huan froze for a moment, before the rage melted off his face and he stared searchingly at him.

He didn’t know what A-Huan was looking for in his eyes, but whatever it was, he found it. Suddenly A-Huan’s hands shot up and clasped around Nie Mingjue’s cheeks, pulling his face

down so that he could fit their lips together.

Before Nie Mingjue could react, A-Huan licked along the line of his lips, and they caved into each other in a desperate kiss.

The world fell away around them as he focused on the dream come true that was A-Huan in his arms, kissing him.

Some vestige of his self control that sounded disturbingly like Huaisang telling him to get more information before moving forward gave him enough strength to push back after what felt like not nearly enough time but was probably quite a while. "A-Huan?" He whispered questioningly. It wasn't that he didn't want this, didn't want this to go on forever actually, but they'd both accepted long ago they couldn't. That they loved each other too much to stop if they started, and it wasn't fair to whoever they married (who A-Huan married, because Nie Mingjue really doubted that he'd live that long). Not to mention the political repercussions if it ever came out what they were doing.

Fuck, it had been years since he'd let anything but Xichen fall from his lips directed towards the other, a line in the sand between the love he felt and his role as sect leader.

A-Huan leaned up, kissing him lightly on the lips one more time, just a short peck, before he spun around and headed for the door, pausing to look over his shoulder. "I'll explain later, I can't leave A-Zhan alone with them much longer. Thank you, A-Jue." With that he rushed out of the room in a flutter of white and blue robes, and Nie Mingjue could only gaze after him, his hands feeling emptier than they ever had before.

XxXxX

Meng Yao looked as understanding as he could while he nodded along to Qin Cangye's rant. In another room across the hall, Madam Qin was talking to Wen Qing. Due to how close they were to Jin Guangshan previously, they'd been the first victims he'd chosen to talk to. He wished he'd been able to speak to Madam Jin beforehand, however she'd remained sequestered in her rooms with a sizable portion of the Jin hierarchy, only having a servant acknowledge the reshuffled discussion planned for the evening.

While he doubted a woman as 'honorable' as her would do something underhanded, he'd still posted Wen and Nie guards around the treasury, the main hall, and all the various exits he'd discovered through his visits or his spies. Things looked so bad for the Jin right now that it seemed highly likely they would be bankrupted from reparations for all of Jin Guangshan's indiscretions. He'd had to take a few moments to himself to contemplate his life before he'd moved to start questioning people per Sect Leader Wen's request.

From some of the reactions he'd seen, from everything that he'd found before this, he knew that Jin Guangshan took more than a few women to his bed unwillingly. It was like Jin Guangshan had taken pleasure in deliberately forcing the female relatives of his allied sects to cleave to him.

But for the women of lower status, while some of them appeared to have been forced as well, just as many appeared to have bought into the lie that they were special in some way. How

many women had been strung along like his mother, hopeful that Jin Guangshan would come and take them away, raise their status and end the painful lives they'd previously been subjected to, especially if they gave birth to his children.

A few had even shown up at the Tower, taking the threads to mean they'd been called for. They'd had that exact same damn token his mother cherished like it was a unique treasure.

He'd wanted to rage. To subvert the Nie guards himself and kill the man via lingchi or by castrating him and choking him on his own dick or any of the other thousand ways running through his mind.

But Wen Ruohan was far more creative at torturing people, and he'd certainly seen his sect leader's insight, plans, and patience pay off spectacularly. If Wen Ruohan saw purpose in him gathering all these stories, he would do it.

Though maybe he'd poison Jin Guangshan's food to give him the shits while he did so.

XxXxX

Wen Ruohan couldn't help but smile as he patted the qiankun pouch at his waist that held the bitch's hand. He'd been contemplating what to do with it the entire morning as he'd flitted from one furious clan to another, happily basking in the chaos of the cultivation world's so-called-elite's stupidity finally coming to the forefront. He still hadn't decided what to do with it yet, though he was partial to the idea of using the hand as an offering to his ancestors by throwing it in the volcano.

He owed thanks to his ancestors for how wonderfully breathtaking his world had turned out to be.

Maybe he could throw a banquet for the occasion as well?

It would be a good excuse to get all his favorites together, especially if he turned it into an annual offering of his enemies' losses to his ancestors.

Hmm, but would Wei Wuxian find it a bit too much? The poor thing still cared so much for those beneath him. It would undoubtedly take years before he truly accepted his rightful place.

Perhaps he should have a private ceremony for it before the banquet celebrating Wei Wuxian's birthday this ye-

Wen Ruohan stopped in the middle of the hallway.

Had he celebrated Wei Wuxian's birthday last year?

Now that he thought about it, he'd given Wei Wuxian so many gifts, celebrated his coming to the Nightless City and thrown banquets when he left to give his grandson one last good evening before he had to go back to the dump of Lotus Pier, and his grandson had definitely joined him for Xu-er's birthday, Wen Qing's and her brother's, and all his other favorites, but...



He quickly ran through all his knowledge of his grandson from their conversations and from the reports on him.

He didn't know his grandson's birthday!

How dare his spymasters fail so utterly that he didn't know such basic information!

He would need to speak to Meng Yao to determine whether the young man was aware of the gap, and his culpability in it given how he'd taken control of most of the information gathering surrounding Wei Wuxian.

Then he'd need to set him on gathering the information if he didn't know the date.

Wen Ruohan couldn't possibly appear as if he didn't know something so vital!

And he'd just have to throw an even larger celebration this year to make up for missing last year and all the ones before it.

Perhaps a parade?

Or a festival?

Yes, a festival would be good, he mused as he drew close to their rooms. Wei Wuxian did so enjoy crowds and flitting around street vendors while playing with any child that wandered near.

"-ung Master Wei wouldn't jump out the window, would he?" He heard a servant panic through the door, only to be met with a loaded silence.

"Should we ask Meng Yao?" Another servant finally asked hesitantly.

Wen Ruohan sighed, opening the door. He looked at the servants who looked at him for a moment in shock before bowing deeply. "I take it my grandson managed to slip out?"

"We do-" he waved them into silence. Trust his grandson to be able to quickly dodge his minders, no matter how well meaning.

Really, he needed to find some better way to track that boy.

"I'll find him," he turned on his heel before pausing and turning back to face them. "What clothes did you prepare for this evening?" It would be Wei Wuxian's first event officially presented as his grandson, so Wen Ruohan wanted him to be dressed appropriately.

"Yes! Meng Yao insisted that we bring his best!" One of the servants scurried over to a table, carefully lifting the formal robes to display them for his perusal. Good. They were the ones just a shade off from Wen red, perfectly dyed with gold and black embroidery of firebirds swirling around suns at the edges, the detailing containing rubies and feathers that nearly glowed in the light. The underrobe was Wei Wuxian's preferred black, as was the belt. The outfit didn't contain bracers, as the sleeves were designed to flow and drape, but given Wei Wuxian's preference for things around his wrists or fingers he could fiddle with as he

thought, they'd included a secondary sheer underrobe with dangling gold medallions at the cuff that would peek out from the overrobe.

The head piece selected was the brilliant, delicately carved gold one that he'd had made with rubies Wen Ruohan originally intended for the boy's grandmother.

Yes.

He smiled at the servants, "excellent work." They beamed and bowed. "The belt though, is too simple. Did the black leather one with the gold beading get brought?"

One of the servants bowed before rushing to one of Wei Wuxian's trunks, scurrying back to present him the belt. He held it up to the robe and nodded.

"Perfect," he looked at them, "include the gold hair sticks with the bells. He should be the center of attention this evening as he takes his rightful place."

The servants bowed again.

"Now, which window did he likely go out of?"

He followed the servants' bowed guidance, and wandered through the gardens underneath their rooms. It didn't take him long to spot a few small signs of someone rushing through the underbrush to one of the less maintained groves, and he moved in that direction.

His grandson, while normally adept at avoiding being tracked, could be absent minded when he felt emotionally compromised and had the tendency to leave a trail.

It was good in moments like this when Wen Ruohan needed to find him, but could be a vulnerability if someone else took note. Meng Yao was improving quickly in his cultivation, but it seemed unlikely he'd ever be a true powerhouse. It meant that while Wei Wuxian would have a more than adequate right hand, it would leave him vulnerable to physical attacks.

Definitely something to think about.

Perhaps if he managed to work out the marriage between Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji suitably, the Second Jade could pull double duty as spouse and bodyguard?

From what he'd seen at conferences, the boy lived up to his reputation as a formidable fighter. It wouldn't take long for Wen Ruohan to beat him into a better one, one that would guarantee no harm ever came to his grandson.

He was a second son after all, and though Lan Xichen had yet to sire heirs, someone could drag that moron father of theirs out of seclusion to do his duty by his clan.

Perhaps when Lan Wangji married in, because Wen Ruohan refused to allow his grandson to marry into the oppressive, restrictive pit of despair called Cloud Recesses, would the boy like his father at the ceremony? Wen Ruohan could use accommodating that to force the decrepit

man out of his wallowing and into the real world which would increase the chances of him providing additional Lan heirs.

Thinking on it more, getting the Lans additional heirs through Qingheng-jun would be a good conciliatory gesture to the Lans for insisting that Wei Wuxian take at least one other spouse so he could get his great grandchildren.

He'd even arrange for the other spouse to be the second spouse as he doubted Wei Wuxian would feel interested in anything other than having Lan Wangji as his primary spouse once he acknowledged his feelings. He still liked his earlier plan of having Lady Zhao Jiaying married to Wei Wuxian for the extra exceptional great-grandchildren they would produce, so Wen Ruohan would need to offer quite a bit to get her and her father to accept her being his grandson's second spouse especially after the disaster of her marriage to Wen Chao. The Second Jade of Lan being the first spouse would assist in those negotiations since the young man was well regarded even in his own territories. If the contract clearly delineated roles and duties, he could even see the two getting along as well as spouses could since she'd be practical enough to accept the rewards granted her and not interfere with their relationship.

Perhaps if he threw in a stable of war horses for her brother and designated her as Madam Wen? She had the type of fire and practicality his wife would have appreciated succeeding her, and he doubted Wen Xu would be interested in having a spouse to fill the position when Wen Ruohan stepped back. It would even save him the headache each time he needed to arrange hostess duties.

Yes, she would definitely enjoy that and as Wei Wuxian was a good child and would want a spouse of his to be happy no matter the circumstances he'd undoubtedly support her regardless of how much more he loved Lan Wangji.

Before he could think much more on it, a loud thump drew his attention deeper into the glade, and he quickly moved in that direction. Had his grandson decided on some light sparring to relieve stress?

Maybe he could offer to joi-

Wen Ruohan's mind screeched to a halt as he took in the scene before him.

Lan Wangji, the ever prim, ever proper Second Jade of the stuffy, prudish Lan, had his grandson pinned against a tree, his hands in the middle of divesting the poor boy of his robes as he devoured his mouth. In fact probably the only reason his grandson remained even remotely dressed was that in between the pressure of his back against the tree and the position of his LEGS WRAPPED AROUND THAT DAMNED PERVERT'S WAIST Wei Wuxian's robes had gotten tangled.

They broke apart only for his grandson to make probably the most shameless noise Wen Rouhan had ever heard as his head fell back against the tree, and wasting no time, that good for nothing, grandson-despoiling pig dove in to begin sucking and biting at the boy's throat.

XxXxX

It took a while, but Wei Wuxian finally managed to slip out of the Wen rooms. He felt a bit bad for ditching A-Ming and Su Meng like that, but he needed...

He didn't know but it wasn't being surrounded by people that would watch every twitch as he tried to think through everything that happened earlier.

Wandering the overly perfect gardens of Koi Tower seemed like a decent enough way to try and figure things out, especially since he doubted he'd be able to slip away in order to use his normal method of distraction, night hunting. Or drinking.

Ugh... Adding alcohol to his spinning thoughts almost seemed like a good idea, but...

No. It sucked but he needed to figure things out sober.

Completely ignoring Wen Xu suddenly deciding that he would propose to Jiang Yanli, which kind of just resulted in an endless wail in the back of his head, he...

Wei Wuxian had a family.

Actual blood family.

Even though Madam Yu had long ago ensured that he'd never dare to say it out loud again, he really did consider Jiang Yanli and Jiang Cheng his siblings. Uncle Jiang and Madam Yu were the closest thing he had to parents.

He loved them.

He did.

He felt grateful for everything they did for him.

But sometimes in the middle of the night, with only darkness and the sounds of the river as his company, he would contemplate the lonely ache deep inside of him and admit that it wasn't enough.

He didn't really belong with them. As much as he needed them, wanted them...

They weren't *his*.

The Wens... For all his confusion over why, they'd made him *theirs* and encouraged him to do the same in return.

Now that he knew for sure why, it...

It...

He had no idea what to do.

A disturbingly large part of him wanted to go to Wen Ruohan and beg to stay with him. To do anything he needed to so that he could submerge himself in the place that he'd been allowed

to carve out for himself in the Nightless City and bask in the warmth of a family that openly welcomed him. Where his existence didn't cause conflict.

Still a part at the back of his head that sounded just like Madam Yu kept telling him that by even considering staying with the Wen was a betrayal. That it'd be spitting in the face of the people that took him in, raised him, made him their first disciple. That he'd hurt Shijie and Jiang Cheng.

His distant relations.

He had to pause to lean against a perfectly manicured tree, and swallow down the urge to vomit at the thought of that gray strand between him and Madam Yu. When he'd been designing the talisman and the most he could safely get it to display was relations from three generations back, second cousins had seemed disappointingly closely related.

But were they?

It just meant that he and Madam Yu had the same great-grandparents. Really, did that even really count as family? Was there some type of etiquette guide that would tell him if it did? Someone he trusted enough that he could ask for advice?

He buried his face in his hands.

There wasn't.

For all this debacle let him know that he actually had living, breathing blood family, it really only highlighted to him that he was... alone.

The only people he could think of outside of the Jiang and the Wen were Nie Huaisang or Lan Zhan, and...

Through all his protestations, Nie Huaisang would be half ruthlessly objective and half against anything Wen. Wei Wuxian couldn't even be sure that his friend would want anything to do with him now that he knew he was related to the man that murdered his father.

And even thinking about Lan Zhan made him want to cry.

Wei Wuxian had hurt him. He hadn't meant to, but his face earlier...

The burning pressure in his eyes increased so much he dug the heels of his palms into them, trying to force the tears back physically since he couldn't guarantee that he'd be able to hold back via willpower alone.

He felt so unbelievably stupid. From his own experiences, he knew that the righteous sects weren't as righteous as they presented themselves as. While occasional exceptions existed, most of the people in them weren't any better than any other privileged, spoiled, superior asshole that thought harassing street kids counted as good entertainment.

He should've known that even the Lan kept secrets, no matter what rules they carved onto their wall.

But he'd... trusted maybe? Trusted that if the Lan would treat him the way they did, they had a reason for it, just like Madam Yu.

After all, they were better than Wei Wuxian who at his heart remained a tiny, worthless brat, scrambling for food and for shelter. For someone to see him. While they could be cruel, the people from clans mattered. Their wants and needs deserved to be fulfilled. If something happened to them, people noticed and cared.

He scowled.

No. That didn't quite fit either.

Wei Wuxian kicked off the tree to start moving again. He veered even further from the paths, looking for somewhere to run through some sword forms, hoping that at least would help clear his mind. He'd always been better at moving meditation even if Madam Yu, and later Lan Qiren, insisted he utilize the more traditional sitting silently method.

As he ventured further into the garden, he heard the distinct sound of something, probably someone, actually, hitting wood hard enough for it to shatter. He figured it was a 'someone' because rather than the chaotic cadence of the various things they hunted knocking down trees or buildings, the noise sounded more similar to a young initiate that'd just formed their golden core ripping through training dummies until they could control their strength.

It probably wasn't very generous of him, but he couldn't help but perk up at the thought of some young kid needing some help working through the revelations of the day. There was the possibility they'd be angry enough at him to completely distract themselves from whatever was happening in their personal lives.

He practically skipped towards the noise, only to come to a shocked standstill as he saw the sheer amount of destruction he'd wandered into.

He blinked as he also saw who was causing the destruction.

Wei Wuxian could honestly say that the last thing he'd expected to see was Lan Zhan beating up trees in a clearing completely unaware of his surroundings.

Rather than alerting the other cultivator to his presence, he could only watch helplessly as Lan Zhan demolished his surroundings with a series of truly gorgeous, barehanded strikes.

Then Lan Zhan grabbed a downed trunk almost wider than Wei Wuxian was tall, gripped it in the middle and *ripped* it in half.

A noise that sounded suspiciously like a whimper burst out of Wei Wuxian, causing Lan Zhan to spin towards him. Another whimper-like sound punched its way out of his chest as he saw Lan Zhan's pretty, furious, stunning, rage filled, absolutely perfect face. His eyes were liquid gold in their fury, like the hottest parts of a fire just waiting to consume everything in its path.

“Lan Zhan!” He smiled nervously, glad he didn’t stutter as something seized in his lungs and caused a flurry of butterflies to explode in his stomach. Lan Zhan’s eyes widened a moment, before narrowing on him, some emotion he couldn’t name taking over them.

With his luck it was incandescent rage.

“Lan Zhan!” He bowed. “I seem to always be messing up when it comes to our friendship, and all I can do is say sorry! I’m sorry that I upset you today, I was just so mad at the Jin and like always I didn’t think and I-”

“It’s not you,” Lan Zhan interrupted him, and Wei Wuxian flew up to stare at him in shock. Lan Zhan never interrupted anyone! It was against the rules.

“But I-”

Lan Zhan shook his head. “You showed the truth of things.”

Wei Wuxian tilted his head. “I still- I still upset you. You don’t have to tell me how or why, but if there is anything I can do to help, I’m happy to.”

Lan Zhan almost looked ready to cry at his words, and Wei Wuxian felt something almost sour at the back of his throat. “Ahh ahh Lan Zhan! Don’t look at me like that! It’s the least I can do since it’s all my fault! Seriously, you can set me to writing lines or copying the rules or even have your Uncl-”

“No!” Lan Zhan snapped with another swift, single shake of his head, only to meet Wei Wuxian’s eyes again, a look of almost pure rage overcoming his normally calm features. “You did nothing wrong. And my Uncle has no right.”

That stopped every single thought in Wei Wuxian’s head. He swallowed, and despite multiple attempts he could only barely whisper his next words. “Lan Zhan? Are you okay?”

They stood there for so long staring at each other that Wei Wuxian almost felt the need to just bow and run and hide with how seen he felt, but he couldn’t leave Lan Zhan like this.

“My father,” Lan Zhan finally stated. “He... He is not my brother’s father.”

Wei Wuxian froze. “What? But that’s not possible, right? I mean, you both... You’re just... and Lan Xichen loves you so much! And your Uncle! It’s against the Lan rules to lie and he’d never lie to you, right? And I-”

Lan Zhan made a frustrated noise, hauling around to punch another poor tree to smithereens. Wei Wuxian bit back the whimper that wanted to crawl out of his throat for some reason. He didn’t know what that was but now was very much not the time, thank you.

He needed to find some way to help that wasn’t opening his stupid mouth again.

Then he noticed the blood on Lan Zhan’s knuckles. “Oh no! Lan Zhan!” He darted forward and grabbed the other’s hands, ignoring the way he tensed at the contact. Lan Zhan could berate him for not keeping his distance after Wei Wuxian made sure his perfect hands hadn’t

been harmed. How long had Lan Zhan been out here punching things from his hands to be in this kind of state? Cultivators rarely took damage due to throwing punches unlike civilians, they either had to hit something really hard, or too often for their cores to manage it. “Your poor hands! They’re too nice to get ruined over someone else’s stupidity! What happens if you hurt a finger and can’t play your guqin! You should have this unworthy one punch things for you instead! I’m very good at that!”

He carefully trailed his fingers over the split knuckles, pouring spiritual energy into them to help them heal faster. Lan Zhan’s breath caught, but after a moment he finally relaxed in Wei Wuxian’s hold.

They stood there in an actually rather peaceful silence as Wei Wuxian worked. After they were healed, Wei Wuxian played with the long delicate fingers for a moment under the guise of inspecting them for more damage. All of Lan Zhan was too unfairly pretty.

He grinned up at the Second Jade. He threaded their fingers together and raised them for Lan Zhan’s inspection. “See! All better now! Though we should find some water to help rinse the blood off, unless you have some secret Lan trick to get rid of it, which, like, you have to since you wear white so much. Trying to keep my robes clean back in the Cloud Recesses was so hard!” He whined, liking the way their fingers fit together so much he couldn’t help but try other configurations as he rambled, all of them perfect. “I swear, it’s like, you sit down on one rock or are even a little careless with a chopstick and boom, clothes ruined and you’d have to do sooo many lines! Not that I minded spending time with you to do lines, Lan Zhan, but I’d rather we’d got to spend time together doing something else.”

He brightened up at the thought. “Like sparring! I loved fighting with you when we met! You were so awesome and fierce that night! I always wanted to spar more with you but you never came to the guest training areas.” Wei Wuxian grinned up at Lan Zhan over their fingers. “Want to spar now? That always helps when I’m frustrated and it would be better than punching the poor trees, I think. Or we could go drink! Oh wait, you don’t like to drink, I’m sorry! I’m so thoughtless I-wah!” Lan Zhan hands pulled from his own, reached for him, practically encircling his whole head, those long, perfect fingers threading into his hair and his palms cupped his jaw and he kissed him.

“La-mmph!” Wei Wuxian managed to get out before he melted, throwing his arms around Lan Zhan and clutching at that perfect hair and- oh.

Oh.

Was this why he wanted Lan Zhan’s eyes on him all the time?

That caused the heat that curled in his gut whenever they did?

The butterflies?

The sounds that started in his belly whenever Lan Zhan did almost anything and tried to claw their way out of him.



Lan Zhan licked into his mouth and began devouring him. He pulled his flawless hands from Wei Wuxian's face, but before he could pull his mouth away to complain at them leaving him, Lan Zhan grabbed his ass and lifted him up to guide his legs around his waist and he had to break apart their mouths to allow out the whimper of air the motion stirred in him.

Lan Zhan spun them, practically slamming Wei Wuxian back onto the trunk of one of the still standing trees. The small burst of pain sent fireworks along his spine, some crawling up through Wei Wuxian's throat to release themselves as a groan into Lan Zhan's mouth while the rest shot straight to his cock which hardened practically to rock beneath his clothes. Lan Zhan leaned into him so his body did the work of pinning Wei Wuxian in place as his hands buried into his robes, stroking along his sides and grasping at every part of him.

Lan Zhan shifted a knee so Wei Wuxian's hardness stroked against his stomach, the other's equally stiff member rubbed tantalizingly against his backside, and he couldn't help but break their kiss off to drop his head back so he could breathe.

"Hands off, Lan Wangji," Wen Ruohan's voice cut through the air like a sword, and Wei Wuxian's eyes flew open to stare in mortified horror at the sect leader, at his grandfather, standing on the other side of the little clearing, his arms crossed and his eyes narrowed in... rage.

Lan Zhan stopped biting at his neck, which in almost any other situation would be the equivalent of torture, but right now wasn't nearly enough. "Lan Zhan!" He gasped, his hands moving from clenching in Lan Zhan's robes to pushing his shoulders away, trying to gain enough room to stand.

The Second Jade finally stepped back, his hands trailing slowly from inside Wei Wuxian's robes - oh god his robes were practically falling off him with how loose they'd gotten. Wen Ruohan would kill him for shaming him like this. Because oh gods Wen Ruohan was his grandfather and cared about him and he could actually bring the man shame. He whined, pressing harder, trying to get Lan Zhan to move faster, but the other went cautiously, making sure Wei Wuxian had his feet under him before turning to face Wen Ruohan, his face a stoic mask that fit his moniker perfectly.

Lan Zhan promptly bowed deeply. "This humble one requests permission to marry Wei Ying."

Wei Wuxian froze for longer than he probably should have.

"My grandson is precious, Second Young Master Lan. What makes you think I would possibly marry him to someone shameless enough to try and deflower him in a garden!"

Lan Zhan bowed just a bit lower. "This Lan Wangji is willing to marry into the Wen Sect to make up for his presumption."

Wei Wuxian keened, his hands instinctively flying up to tug at his hair as he started panicking. "Oh gods, Lan Qiren is going to kill me."

Lan Zhan spun out of his bow to grab his hands, preventing him from tugging at his hair.  
“No.”

Wei Wuxian couldn't help but keen again.

“Lan Wangji is correct, Lan Qiren will not harm you.” Wen Ruohan stated, and when Wei Wuxian looked over at him, the man was frowning slightly as he glared at Lan Zhan's hands holding Wei Wuxian's. His fingers almost spasmed as he fought the urge to grip Lan Zhan tighter and spin them so that he stood between the two. “My grandson is brilliant, strong, and a perfect young master! What makes you worth him when you would take such liberties?” Wen Ruohan growled at Lan Zhan, who gently released his hands, squared his shoulders, and met the man's gaze head on.

“I am the Second Young Master of the Lan and a strong cultivator. Also, a first edition of the Quintessence of Wen penned by Wen Mao in the Lan archives that can be requested as part of the dowry.”

Wen Ruohan actually raised an eyebrow at that, but shook his head. “Still not convinced, little Lan,” Wen Ruohan stated resolutely.

Lan Zhan's eyes narrowed. “Wei Wuxian wants me. He is the best thing in the universe and should get everything he wants, and I love him enough to ensure that he does.”

Wei Wuxian buried his face in his hands and wailed. “LAN ZHAN! I love you too, but you need to give me warning before you say anything like that!”

“Mn,” Lan Zhan agreed from next to him, sounding distinctly pleased with himself, and Wei Wuxian wailed again as he realized he had just confessed that he loved him out loud, in front of his grandfather, while Lan Zhan was in the middle of proposing.

Wen Ruohan laughed, a deep booming sound that practically shook the ground, and Wei Wuxian resolved to create a talisman that would let the earth swallow him.

“I look forward to the marriage negotiations, Lan Wangji.”

Wei Wuxian froze, before dropping his hands and staring in shock at his grandfather.

“Sect Leader Wen,” Lan Zhan replied with another bow.

“Lan Zhan!” Wei Wuxian shrieked, throwing his arms around the other and kissing him fiercely in joy.

A hand closed around the collar of his robe and yanked him back, away from Lan Wangji.  
“No! You two will behave properly until the wedding!”

“But Sect Leader Wen!” Wei Wuxian cried as he got dragged away from Lan Zhan's perfect everything.

“And there will be chaperones!”

“But-”

“No! I refuse to allow my grandson to elope like some hooligan! Your wedding will be as it should be! One for the history books! And making Cloud Recesses pay for most of it will cause Lan Qiren to have a fit and I will see that happen so help me!”

“As you say, Sect Leader Wen,” Lan Zhan stated calmly where he kept pace with them, with what Wei Wuxian could only describe as a smug smirk on his face. He gave up, burying his face in his hands as his grandfather pulled him along, Lan Zhan *HEGOTTOMARRYLANZHAN* at his side.

XxXxX

Just as Sect Leader Ouyang looked ready to jump to his feet in ‘righteous anger’ for the fourth time, Jiang Yanli signaled another round of servants forward to ‘refill’ the wine yet again. In the moments it took for the room to glance at and dismiss them, Meng Yao drew Madam Bai’s attention to the man. Her subsequent words to the man were more bluntly flattering than she herself would have used, but they sufficed to defuse the man from creating another interruption to the ongoing discussions. Wen Rouhan immediately took the opening to quite decisively order that the Yingchuan Wang sect would owe the Tingshan He reparations in an amount to be determined in negotiations the next day, overseen by Wen Xu.

It felt delightfully refreshing to be part of such smooth maneuvering.

The things that could be accomplished when talented people were allowed to do the things that they did best...

The agenda for the evening was even actually on time!

No long dithering speeches, no conversations completely overtaken by the more volatile personalities, no one successfully distracting everyone from the core topics even when they did manage to interrupt...

Jiang Yanli, though she feared that she was jinxing herself, started to even think they’d get through this evening without issue, but the most volatile problem had yet to be addressed. At the beginning of the night, Wen Ruohan decreed that the matter of Jin Guangshan would be dealt with last to avoid it being the only topic handled that evening, and that set the tone for those supporting him to guide everything else.

“Young Mistress Jiang,” Jiang Yanli turned to the timid young man trying very hard not to look nervous as he approached her. A-Xian hadn’t been exaggerating when he called Wen Qionglin adorable.

“Young Master Wen,” she bowed her head, smiling brightly.

He practically bowed in half. “There, uh the-” He bowed again, and she barely stopped herself from patting him on the head to A-Cheng and A-Xian when they were younger. “Sorry.”

She bowed again to Wen Qionglin. "If I can be of any assistance to you, I am happy to oblige."

He blushed, and bowed quickly either to hide that or just because. Either way she thought it cute. "There's, I- uh, wine. In the room where everyone else is waiting, the servants there, - uh."

"The room for the escorts is running low on wine? How are they doing with snacks?"

Wen Qionglin smiled gratefully. "Almost out too." He bowed.

"Bin Da," she called quietly, and the man nominally acting as head servant in place of his disappeared leadership quickly bowed. "That hall is going through drinks a bit faster than I'd like if tempers flare. Is there wine in the cellar that can be diluted without impacting the taste too much?"

The man thought for a moment before nodding. "Some honey wine, Young Mistress Jiang."

"Excellent, water it down as much as you can without people complaining and have the kitchens send sweeter snacks there too," the combination of sweet snacks on top of the sweet wine would slow all but the most voracious drinkers, whereas salty snacks would just cause them to drink more. "Also bring out more of the wine for the head tables just in case, and have someone check if the Lans need fresh pots of tea." With the focus on keeping the more volatile sect leaders balanced at just the right level of tipsy and the servants catering to the loudest voices to keep them from causing yet more problems, the quieter Lans, both in the main hall and the waiting room, would likely have been overlooked. "And have the table for Madam Jin readied, Sect Leader Jin's case is going to be brought up shortly." While it wasn't a guarantee the woman would make an appearance, she did enjoy dramatic entrances and power plays much like mother, so swanning in with the Jin that sequestered with her right as her husband's portion of the evening began seemed quite on point.

The man bowed, and with all the appropriate steps, quickly moved away to handle things. Jiang Yanli smiled brightly at Wen Qionglin, "is there anything else needed, Young Master Wen?"

He stared at her and if anything his blush got worse, which she kindly didn't mention. A-Xian had told her the teen still lacked confidence and how many had ignored him or treated him poorly before they'd become friends, but he really did seem too meek to be a Wen. Still she didn't necessarily mind a Young Master that defaulted to respectful rather than to the various versions of arrogant, dismissive, angry, or stupid more common among the sects.

Confidence could be built up.

And as a friend of A-Xian's, Jiang Yanli didn't mind putting in some effort to help Wen Qionglin with his. "Thank you for the quick report, Young Master Wen. Your sense of timing is greatly appreciated."

"You-You're welcome, Young Mistress Jiang," he managed a slight smile.

She raised a hand to indicate some chairs near the door to the main hall. “Would you care to join me for a short break? Things are calm for the moment, and we should rest while we can. I am sure your sister would not mind.”

“Y-Yes! Young Mistress Jiang!”

She made sure he sat first despite his attempts to bow her into a seat. The slightly harried but efficient servants quickly poured them fresh tea and provided a small plate of the same snacks they were serving all the guests. Normally an overflow space like the waiting room would have food and drink of a slightly lesser quality, however as they had anticipated almost every sect leader brought a larger entourage than the requested two cultivators trying to seem important. The only sect leaders that hadn't were from the great sects and a couple of the minor sects that probably didn't have enough of a head count to pump up their numbers while leaving wherever they were staying properly guarded.

With some stern words from Wen Ruohan and the other great sect leaders at the door to the main hall, each sect leader sent all their extra cultivators to the arranged waiting room. They'd anticipated that due to the chaos several people forced to the waiting room would be high enough ranked that they may as well just serve the same food and drink to each room, and they'd been right. Quite a few relegated to the waiting room were sect heirs, first disciples, honored elders, and other well respected cultivators.

They'd been able to lightly modify the already existing seating charts for the main hall to maintain some semblance of protocol while putting more people in the room than initially planned and keeping those now at odds away from each other. The waiting room on the other hand had been arranged completely dismissive of rank and purely to keep certain sects as far away from each other as possible while keeping them all in sight of the surreptitiously placed Wen and Nie cultivators that would de-escalate things if possible and break up any fights if not. For a space that started as several rooms they'd... remodeled by taking non-load bearing walls out and applying no small amount of talismans, tapestries, and judicious decorations they'd actually managed to make it look quite nice.

A rather exasperated Wen Qing had been placed nominally in charge of that room along with her brother and Nie Huaisang. Truthfully, Nie Huaisang had been a last minute addition as he decided to interject himself into the role and he'd only been able to do so due to the cultivator he'd arranged to take his place at Nie Mingjue's side. She felt the Nie sect leader's resigned sigh in the depth of her heart while Nie Zonghui, the Nie first disciple, laughed.

Though the Nie heir not being at his brother's side wasn't the only difference in the great sect's status quo that drove home exactly how tumultuous the situation was. Lan Xichen stood tall with the other Great Sect Leaders, an icy statue even more indistinguishable from his brother than usual, not acknowledging Lan Qiren at his left shoulder and the man himself was far more taciturn than normal.

A-Xian, who'd never returned to the Jiang rooms, looked splendid in Wen robes as he stood behind Sect Leader Wen with Wen Xu. If he could stop fidgeting it would be more appropriate, but given the bright, real grin on his face, she thought he looked perfect. Even Father's rather dismissive glance at him and the fact he'd brought one of the Jiang Elders to

stand next to a subdued Jiang Cheng hadn't been able to dim his smile for long, though she could see it hurt him.

Father... Father had started the evening looking irritable, only to grow more tired as the evening went on. The lack of his normal, genial personality almost did more to put the other sects on alert than Wen Rouhan's beaming smile, but seeing the serious man practically giddy was its own type of terrifying.

The Jin had not been present to greet guests at all.

Jiang Yanli'd allowed herself to share a sense of smug glee at that with Madam Bai and several of the other ladies beneath their words of concern. Stated kindly, Mother and Madam Jin never endeared themselves to others in their social circles. Stated bluntly, they were cruel haridans. Their arrogance, dismissiveness, and harshness spared few. Jiang Yanli and the other women of Lotus Pier managed to maintain relations around mother, however the rest of the Jin failed to display anything but arrogance to match their Madam, preventing them from salvaging anything but the bare minimum of courteous intersect ties.

Very few sects were truly friends with the Jin for any reason except that they gained more money by staying on their good sides.

This last day had removed all of those sects.

Including the Jiang, though Mother screamed for twenty minutes about it before father ordered her to be silent. She'd shrieked at him for being a coward, for kowtowing to Wen Rouhan, for her now missing hand.

Jiang Yanli had rather hoped Wen Ruohan would have asked for her tongue as well, but removing the hand that hurt her A-Xian, that threatened her and A-Cheng whenever they didn't live up to her skewed ideals felt like a wonderful start.

Because she knew that Wen Ruohan was just getting started.

Watching father stand straight, raise his voice to her, order her to return to Lotus Pier before she did anymore damage...

Jiang Yanli had needed to drop to her knees, bow her head low, and force false tears to hide her grin.

When mother argued, father'd leaned in to mutter something to her quietly enough that even cultivation enhanced hearing couldn't pick it up.

Mother left escorted by five of their senior cultivators who made minimal effort to hide they were there to contain her rather than protect her from outside harm in her weakened state.

Jiang Yanli smiled brighter at Wen Qionglin. "Have you heard that several of the sect leader's are petitioning to have the competitions started up again?"

Wen Qionglin nodded quickly. "Yes! I hope that one of them is archery! Se-Sect Leader Wen wants me to compete in it."

“A-Xian spoke very highly of your skills,” she said lightly, and watched Wen Qionglin’s eyes widen and his blush worsen. “He said that you were nearly as skilled at healing as well!”

“I-I’m nothing compared to my sister!” He said quickly, looking at her with big doe eyes, and Jiang Yanli once again resisted the urge to pat his head. Wen Qionglin really was so sweet.

She let out a bit of a giggle, carefully hiding her mouth with her sleeve. “But your sister is a genius, isn’t she? I can’t think of any that compare to her.”

Wen Qionglin quickly nodded again, this time so hard his hair bounced. “She is a genius! Wen Qing is-”

“I’m what?”

Wen Qionglin scrambled to his feet and bowed to his sister, who was standing at the end of the hallway looking at them sharply. “Sister!”

Jiang Yanli followed at a more sedate pace. “Lady Wen,” she bowed as politely as she would to any of the senior healers.

The woman looked her over once, before turning her attention solely to her brother. “What took you so long? You said you were just getting more booze to keep the idiots quiet!”

“Apologies, Lady Wen, the wine should be arriving momentarily, it was my fault he got delayed!” Jiang Yanli bowed again, a smile on her face. “I asked him to keep me company for some tea before the last cases, as we will need to be at our best during them.”

“She’s right, sister! The wine and snacks have already been ordered!”

Wen Qing smacked Wen Qionglin upside the head. “Letting yourself get distracted at a time like this!”

“Sister!”

Wen Qing smacked his shoulder. “Go back to the room, make sure that the pouches I left get steeped in the wine!”

Wen Qionglin bowed before scurrying away. “It was nice chatting, Young Master Wen!” Jiang Yanli called after him, and he tried to turn back to bow to her, only to trip and smack into the wall. He blushed furiously and darted away before either of them could say anything else.

Jiang Yanli smiled at the other woman. “Wei Wuxian mentioned you were formidable, Lady Wen. As a fellow elder sister, I am happy to see he did not exaggerate.”

Wen Qing sighed. “That idiot does occasionally have a moment of insight.”

Jiang Yanli couldn’t help a laugh. “Yes, it’s quite something, isn’t it! He’ll come up with some type of incredible new invention or manage the perfect turn of phrase to make someone cooperate but then forget their name or to eat when he’s too excited or he’ll wear the same

clothes for three days straight!” She counted Wen Qing’s answering smirk as a win, and took the chance to wink at her. “If you’ll forgive the impropriety, Lady Wen, your little brother seems as equally adorable as mine, I can see why A-Xian likes him so much!”

Wen Qing looked at her appraisingly for a long moment before she suddenly nodded. “Nothing to forgive, Young Mistress Jiang.” With that she turned on her heel and stalked back towards the waiting room with the same type of single mindedness that A-Xian would display whenever he’d gotten some foolish idea in mind.

Jiang Yanli took a deep breath, let it out, and fixed her smile on her face.

It really should have been more obvious that A-Xian was a Wen.

XxXxX

Lan Wangji felt hard pressed to do anything other than stare at where Wei Ying sat just behind Wen Ruohan’s left shoulder, no matter how loud the shouting among the sect leaders got.

His Wei Ying looked absolutely gorgeous in red. He’d look even better in wedding red, his lips a matching, swollen color from biting kisses like earlier that day. His hands tingled at the thought of burying in ceremonial robes, pushing, pulling, and ripping until his perfect, gorgeous flesh was bared to him.

Of finally getting to touch him.

Of sucking kisses along his throat and chest to his nipples, laving them with attention until they were as puffy as his lips.

Of going further down.

Despite the distraction of Wei Ying’s radiance, Lan Wangji noted the apparent continued surprise from many other clans at brother leading the Lan rather than Uncle. Thinking back to their confrontation earlier today, Lan Wangji couldn’t help but approve. He approved even more of the fact that his Uncle now sat still next to Lan Wangji behind brother’s shoulder, teeth clenched so tightly together that he may as well have been under a silencing spell. Thinking of how often the spell got placed on his Wei Ying, Lan Wangji couldn’t help but feel a curl of satisfaction deep down inside.

The events of this day caused Lan Wangji to reflect on himself and his clan in a way he didn’t quite think he’d ever done before.

It made him reexamine instances that he’d perhaps not quite brushed off, but pushed down and made excuses for. Justified the breaking of one rule by using another.

He’d never really thought of why all three thousand two hundred ninety four rules needed to be memorized by both inner and outer disciples but the elders only quoted about fifty of them regularly.

*Respect the filial ones.*



*Do not neglect your studies.*

*Do not disrespect the elders.*

*Honor your teacher and respect his teaching.*

*Maintain your own discipline.*

*Do not forget the grace of the forefathers.*

*Do not be ill-mannered.*

*Do not disregard laws and rules.*

*Be loyal.*

*Behave yourself.*

*Be grateful.*

Those rules got repeated in his presence as instruction or command more times than he could count.

Lan Wangji did not remember the last time outside lessons, when being directed at a younger disciple, or when another's punishment involved reciting rules aloud that he'd heard others.

*Arrogance is prohibited.*

*Be modest.*

*Do not treat others with contempt.*

*Do not be a follower of the rich and powerful.*

*Love and respect yourself.*

So many rules meant to raise people ignored in behalf of those that silenced them. Kept them in their place.

*Do not make loud noises.*

*Do not walk too fast.*

*Do not laugh without reason.*

*Do not go out at night.*

*Do not be a social climber.*

Lan Wangji's contemplation of his world, of the words and actions of his elders, of the rules he'd thought the truly righteous worked by, revealed a disturbing hypocrisy. One that he'd

never been aware of even though in retrospect it'd been on the periphery of his entire life.

Lan Wangji answered questions correctly and got praised for his dutiful learning.

Wei Wuxian answered questions correctly and got condemned for impudence.

Lan Wangji stated he could resolve a night hunt and received praise for this confidence.

Wei Wuxian stated he could resolve a night hunt and received condemnation for his arrogance.

Lan Wangji'd been born into the main clan of a great sect. He'd been raised with the best his clan could offer at his fingertips under the foregone expectation that he would be exceptional.

It had been... not easy, exactly, to meet those expectations. But he'd never had a problem with the rules, or conforming to the desires of his elders like many of the other students. They'd been unable to sit still the way he could, unable to easily memorize the rules, facts, or forms that he could. Needed more incentives or punishments to practice music or do sword drills or study.

He'd merely thought that others hadn't applied themselves, and as such he'd been proud when he'd been put in charge of discipline for his fellow disciples. He hadn't questioned any of the punishments, had ignored the instances they'd made him uncomfortable, because the elders had to know what they were doing, right? Lan Wangji's hands tightened into fists again at his side to stop them from moving. He couldn't parse out whether he wanted to go up and cradle Wei Ying's shining face in his hands and kiss him and tell him it'd be okay and that no one would ever hurt him again as long as Lan Wangji existed, or to turn on his uncle and break his lying, self-righteous jaw.

His uncle had even placed the most recent rule on the wall himself.

*Interacting with Wei Wuxian is forbidden.*

Even before what happened today, the rule... troubled him. He knew that Wei Wuxian encompassed everything the righteous sects should aspire to. Brilliant, bold, kind, generous, protective, honest, caring, charitable, decisive, loving... Lan Wangji could go on and on and on for hours listing Wei Ying's virtues and it would never be enough to adequately express how much *better* Wei Wuxian was than everyone else.

How he was the best of them and did the right thing even when others spoke poorly of him.

He didn't understand others enough to know why. Maybe because they felt jealous or intimidated or cowardly or any of the things Lan Xichen accused their family of as they tried to justify their lies and hypocrisy.

While he could sense that brother remained unmoored from everything they discovered, he appeared to have come to some type of decision though he had not shared that with Lan Wangji yet.

Whatever that decision was, Lan Wangji would support his brother wholeheartedly. Especially if it went against...

He clenched his fists, digging his nails into his palms to the point the nails he kept sharp for his guqin sliced into the flesh to the point he could feel blood welling. He relaxed his grip enough that his skin could heal.

No. Lan Xichen would never allow his Uncle to speak for them again.

Not after what he said when they had confronted him earlier, especially with the way Uncle had just seemed so... so dismissive of them. So unwilling to give them anything.

*"Lan Qiren," brother started icily the moment he entered the room where Lan Wangji waited in silence with Uncle and the elders. Lan Wangji almost regretted brother coming in just then. With his quiet nature, he'd long realized the way silence impacted others and while this situation was different than watching squirming disciples being punished, or going on Night Hunts with his age mates or peers, all four of the elder Lans displayed many of the same twitches indicating they were about to talk if for no other reason than to fill the silence. "I believe an explanation is owed to us."*

*"There is nothing to explain!" Lan Qiren huffed. His arms crossed as he looked down his nose at brother in that way Lan Wangji knew meant he was disappointed. A familiar sting settled in his gut, but he pushed it down. He would beg forgiveness later, after he and brother had their answers. "The matter is over and buried. Think no more of it."*

*"I will think about it, Uncle!" Lan Xichen narrowed his gaze. "If I should even call you that, Lan Qiren?"*

*The question hit Uncle so hard Lan Wangji almost felt the need to try and offer some support to him as well as his brother, but the taken aback look Lan Xichen's words caused quickly got overtaken by anger. "Mind yourself, Lan Xichen! This discourtesy will not be tolerated!" While Lan Wangji agreed their actions were discourteous, given what they'd seen, and more importantly how uncle had reacted, the question was more than justified and throwing this discourtesy back at them felt unfair.*

*His brother obviously felt the same, as his eyes sparked, a determination and anger flashing in them like Lan Wangji had never seen. "If you want courtesy, show me some by answering my question!" Lan Xichen snapped. Lan Wangji carefully clenched his fists behind his back. They did need answers, and he too felt betrayed, but their Uncle was still their Unc-*

*Oh.*

*Yes.*

*No matter what most of the lines meant, they were brothers. That hadn't changed.*

*But for Lan Xichen, Lan Qiren was not his Uncle.*

*He'd...*

*He'd realized it, based on the lines before.*

*But he hadn't entirely processed what that meant because it hurt in a way he hadn't entirely understood - it was something horrifying, overwhelming and all consuming that made him want to cry as he hadn't since he'd been a child begging at his mother's door to be allowed in.*

*He'd realized it, but not truly accepted it.*

*Because as much as he loved and respected his Uncle, he'd pick his brother anytime. Because while his Uncle had been there to provide guidance, instruction, and order, his brother had been the one to clean scraped knees, encourage him, tease him, and be happy for him. Lan Xichen who'd held him in place of his mother and truly loved him.*

*He'd realized it, but it hadn't destroyed him.*

*The line from Lan Wangji to Lan Qiren had been the same color as the ones from those children to their aunts. Their blood relationship had been proven accurate to what he and his brother had been told.*

*The line connecting Lan Xichen and Lan Qiren line had a glaringly obvious different color.*

*Lan Xichen's relationships had changed in that instant far more than Lan Wangji's. His place, his family, the life he'd been trained for since birth was thrown into doubt.*

*"We are your elders! Showing us courtesy is the least you should do as a proper Lan!" Lan Liqin interjected, pulling herself up to glare at Lan Xichen. "We raised you better than this!"*

*Lan Wangji couldn't entirely help a flinch at that, but rallied himself to try and interject on brother's behalf before Lan Xichen got out whatever had him looking so enraged. Before either of them could say anything, however, Lan Peizhi stepped forward, large frame deliberately angled in a way Lan Wangji knew meant that he wanted to loom over them like he would misbehaving young disciples on the training grounds. "That you even need to be reminded of that shows exactly how you have let others influence you to unrighteousness!"*

*Lan Wangji could not find the words to express how wrong he felt that was. And given how angry Lan Xichen was, he needed to. He needed to find the words that would help. But words had never been his strength. He'd always said the wrong thing or misunderstood someone and as such grew to speak very rarely. It was better, easier, to guard his words then constantly get things wrong. Sticking to the most direct, formal speech in order to prevent saying things people could misinterpret. Lan Xichen had always been the one there, explaining what he did not see, understanding all sides of things and finding a way for people to move forward.*

*With Xichen being the one so angry that he could not find the right words now, Lan Wangji needed to be the one to help him but he didn't know how.*

*Everything felt so wrong that he did not know where to begin clarifying things.*

*Instead all he could do was move to stand directly by his brother's side, hoping that Lan Xichen would understand as he always did.*

*Thankfully his presence seemed to ground Lan Xichen, and his brother took a deep breath, before clearly and concisely speaking in a tone that Lan Wangji could not read but that he knew was not a good thing. "Be trustworthy, and others will believe you. Propriety suggests reciprocity. It is impolite not to reciprocate."*

*All of the elders looked furious at his words, save Uncle who looked almost, fearful?*

*The silence resulting from his brother's words felt like a standoff, like the air before the first movement of a spar. Lan Wangji knew he and Lan Xichen would not be the ones to fail.*

*"How dar-" Lan Peizhi broke first only to be silenced by Lan Fenfang grabbing his arm. She also preemptively held up a hand in front of Lan Liqin to silence her as well. The anger in her eyes was still no less than the other two, but she at least turned her gaze to Uncle rather than daring to leave it on his brother.*

*"Lan Qiren," she said icily. "It was you and the Sect Leader that refused to handle this matter righteously. You will deal with the fallout now and remind your nephews of their places."*

*"Our places?" Lan Xichen snapped. "It is you that needs a reminder of keeping one's place!"*

*Lan Fenfang turned a glare on Lan Xichen. "We guided your instruction to raise you and your brother as proper Lans despite the stain of your Mother's blood. You will act like it."*

*Before either Lan Wangji or his brother could do more than gape at the insult, at the order, Uncle stepped in between the two groups. He looked... tired? "Enough," he told his peers before turning to face them.*

*"There is no use in dredging up the past. You two are the sons of my brother and the heirs of Gusu Lan, the Twin Jades. Let that be enough."*

*Lan Xichen regarded uncle for a moment before shaking his head. "No, Lan Qiren. We are not children. Perhaps as a child I did not question the way of the world when visiting Mother as I did not understand things then, nor did I press for answers I couldn't bear to face when our mother died, but what we are now is not enough. Either you tell us the truth of our parents now, or I will assume that the worst fears I buried in my heart as I grew are true and go to Wen Rouhan as the chief cultivator and demand justice for our mother."*

*Lan Wangji couldn't help but turn to look at his brother while the elders behind uncle looked at him aghast. As he'd aged, he'd always felt something was disconcerting with their mother's situation, but he'd been so young and no one, not even brother, had treated it as wrong. He hadn't known that brother had doubts.*

*"There is no need to go so far," Lan Qiren sighed. "Your mother was a rogue cultivator. She originally belonged to a small subsidiary sect of the Lan that went defunct when the sect*

*leader, her father, and her two brothers died defeating a particularly vicious demon.”*

*Lan Wangji took a quiet, calming breath.*

*“Though she chose to wander rather than marry into another sect as was proper, she maintained good ties with us, and often joined Lan disciples on various night hunts.”*

*“Then how did sh-” Lan Xichen started to ask, only for Lan Qiren to raise his hand.*

*“Do not interrupt. I will say this only once, and I will say it as I wish. It was one of those Night Hunt’s that we met her. My brother foolishly fell in love at first sight. Granted that first sight was her slicing the head off a goat yao saving his life, but still, he gave no thought to position or family or anything else and immediately began pursuing her.”*

*He shook his head. “Your mother didn’t return his feelings, though she was kind about it and my brother settled into a friendship with her that lasted even after he became sect leader himself after our father died in the debacle at Yueyang. It was at the celebration for his taking the position that she agreed to stay in the Cloud Recesses to wait out the winter. My brother was ecstatic as he hoped to at least convince her to join the sect even if she would not return his suit.” He swallowed. “We stayed up long past curfew that night, talking about how the future would go.” Was that a... Was uncle, crying?*

*“Just before dawn, a servant woke us. During the night, sometime after the celebration, your mother killed our teacher.” He shook his head again. “Not just our shifu, our Uncle, our mother’s brother.” Yes, uncle was definitely crying. “She claimed he’d been drunk and defiled her.”*

*Lan Xichen made a deep, painful choking sound, and Lan Wangji couldn’t stop himself from reaching out to take his hand like they were children again.*

*“Many demanded she be executed immediately,” Lan Qiren recalled. “Your father pushed back, demanded a trial, for while neither of us wanted to believe our uncle would dishonor such a righteous woman, your mother had proven her character and he owed her his life as well.”*

*Uncle tilted his head back, reigning in his tears before he faced them. “No matter what argument my brother tried to use, it wasn’t enough. She was to be taken to Caiyi and executed. The morning it was scheduled to happen, my brother announced they’d eloped. He’d gone to where she’d been confined, they’d completed their three bows and consummated the marriage. And if anyone sought to harm his wife he would do his duty and take their heads.”*

*“You are too kind to that vile, shameless woma-”*

*Without realizing, Lan Wangji found his hand holding Bichen at Lan Liqin’s throat. “Do not speak ill of others.” He barely recognized his own voice, it sounded so heated.*

*“Especially our mother,” Lan Xichen practically hissed beside him.*

*“Lan Wangji! Sheath your sword!” Uncle ordered.*

*Lan Wangji did not, glaring over the gleaming metal at the incensed elder. Lan Liqin did not look apologetic at all, in fact she looked affronted like she was insulted by Lan Wangji defending his mother when she was the one behaving insultingly. He wished he could say it surprised him, but hadn't Lan Qiren been more angry that Wei Wuxian revealed the lies they had been concealing than upholding the truth?*

*Perhaps Lan Wangji was behaving rudely. He did not know if he cared, but he did know that his mother deserved better than to be insulted. He didn't have as much experience as he'd wish, but he'd still seen things. Seen the way the non-cultivator gentry, the rich, and those in power hurt the poor or the weak. Heard the sad stories of resentful ghosts through inquiry. Knew why Gusu Lan had some of the rules it did, to remind them to be righteous where others were not.*

*Do not bully the weak.*

*Do not look down on the poor.*

*“Did our mother marry Sect Leader Lan willingly?” A loud screeching noise filled Lan Wangji's head at his brother's words, and his stomach lurched.*

*Lan Qiren looked at both of them sadly, before shaking his head. “My brother said so, but she never spoke of it. I don't know for certain.”*

*“What does it matter if she was willing! She was an ungrateful wench! A woman like that should have bowed to the heavens in rapture at catching the eye of su-” Lan Xichen caught Lan Wangji's sword arm before he could drive his blade to pierce Lan Liqin's throat.*

*His brother shook his head. “They are not worth staining Bichen, Lan Zhan.” Lan Wangji's hand couldn't help but tighten on the hilt of his sword. No. No, his brother was right.*

*With a grimace he sheathed Bichen, turning his head to face the wall. He couldn't look at any of them right now, even Uncle.*

*“And what now, Lan Qiren?” Brother demanded. “The talisman revealed that I am your uncle's son, not Qingheng-Jun's.”*

*“That is idiocy,” Lan Qiren spat. “Whatever occurred that night, my brother married her knowing full well what consequences might have resulted. You are his son as much as Wangji.”*

*Lan Xichen's eyes narrowed. “What a wonderfully reasoned righteous response that neatly avoids answering the question. Since you are not willing to answer that question, perhaps another? Even before he sequestered himself, I don't remember Qingheng-jun ever being together in the same room as our mother. How was Lan Wangji conceived in that case?”*

*Lan Wangji's stomach did flips and he grit his teeth. Even though he knew they needed the answers to these questions, he didn't understand how his brother could ask them.*

*Lan Qiren stared at them, looking sad. Defeated. "The elders pushed for another child when I refused to marry. I don't know the details but your parents complied. My brother went into seclusion right after."*

*Lan Wangji felt his eyes tighten and something wet fall down his cheek. The last time he cried had been outside mother's door after her death. It seemed right that he did so again now after learning even a little of what she had been through.*

*And to know that his uncle, the man he trusted more than anyone to be righteous, to uphold the values and courtesies that he spoke of...*

No. Lan Wangji shook his head. He would not think about it anymore. Brother had been right in ordering him to leave immediately after to cool his head, and not just because it caused him to encounter his Wei Ying and blessedly gain the right to marry him even if he had not been able to tell anyone yet due to everything going on.

He may not know for certain if his leaving the Lan was what his mother would have wanted, but it felt more right to him than continuing down his current path.

Ever since the discussion conference a year ago when the monster everyone was too scared to confront took an interest in the person that Lan Wangji couldn't help but... couldn't help but care for, he'd questioned things. A part of him had felt ashamed it took someone he knew being threatened directly to begin to do so he'd assigned himself to copy all the lines related to caring for others fifty times as punishment, and meditated every night on the promise he and Wei Ying had made as teenagers and what it truly meant.

No matter what brother had said to him about Wei Wuxian being strong, smart, and quick enough to survive the Wen, Lan Wangji worried for him.

When time passed and rumors of the Wen Sect Leader's continued attention continued to spread, his worry turned to concern.

Then the story about Wen Chou being punished reached him and he feared.

He feared enough that he couldn't help but go to Lan Xichen, seeking a type of reassurance he hadn't needed in ages. Even though he didn't know what words to use, brother understood. When Uncle came across them and heard what they'd been speaking of, he hadn't understood. Lan Wangji had been shocked by the man's vitriol. He'd known since before Wei Wuxian arrived that Uncle held a certain level of distaste for the other teen. In retrospect it had been another thing that he didn't question, especially with how he'd eventually ended up meeting him.

Hearing his Uncle spit that Wei Wuxian deserved whatever the Wens did to him and that Lan Wangji should forget someone so shameless... So unrighteous...

It had been *wrong*.

Wei Wuxian could be shameless, yes, but he had also been the most righteous person Lan Wangji had ever met. He'd been bright and caring and loving. He'd risked his life for others



without a second thought, had stood against evil and truly wanted to help people.

He hadn't known how to speak up for Wei Wuxian then, especially when brother had kept his silence until after Uncle had left after ordering that they do lines for... Lan Wangji was still not sure why. And even then Lan Xichen had not completely gainsayed Uncle, just told Lan Wangji to prepare for the worst as the Wen were involved and none of them were kind.

But what everyone knew didn't match what happened. Rather than further antagonistic moves, the Wen sent reparations, not just to the Lan for the waterborne abyss, but to the people. Other sects reported the same. Night hunts that had been pushed into other territories were handled with ruthless efficiency. And the stories of what the Wen were doing to their people went from horrors to being unbelievably kind. Schools and food for orphans and all sorts of things that had people scratching their heads, especially when they learned that the reason for the sudden change in Wen policy was *Wei Wuxian*.

Who from all reports was flourishing, and the level of genius he displayed offhandedly at Wen Ruohan's insistence any time they went somewhere together left people flabbergasted. This was not the useless layabout of a first disciple given his position only out of a sense of lost love, or the troublemaker constantly called out by Lan Qiren. This was the type of brilliant cultivator that would have been held up with the greats.

That did not stop Uncle and the other elders from speaking ill of him, nor the stories of how poorly his sect leaders thought of him spread by anyone that visited Lotus Pier.

Today had been much the same, Uncle accused Wei Ying of using the talisman before they'd known anything when the rules stated that one should gather facts before casting blame. He'd wanted to punish Wei Ying for revealing the truth of his own deceit.

The rest of the elders behaved just like him. Much like his mother, they wanted to destroy Wei Ying.

If his family would not uphold truth and righteousness he would no longer allow himself to be confused. Lan Wangji's eyes had been opened and he would no longer obey the words they spoke but did not follow themselves. Actions spoke louder than words when it came to righteousness and for all his past actions, with his current actions Wen Ruohan had proven his worth in comparison to the other sects.

Wen Ruohan not only supported Wei Ying in helping people, he was the only person that did right by him. And not with the clothes or any of the finery (though Wei Ying looked gorgeous in it) but by standing by his side, by speaking truth and not just what was easy. Wen Ruohan had listened where others just spoke.

Lan Wangji did not doubt that soon Wen Ruohan would arrange for Wei Ying to join the Wen. It was why he had told Wen Ruohan earlier that he'd marry into the Wen, a prospect that seemed strangely welcome now. At least the Wen were honest in their cruelty and compassion both.

And as long as Wei Ying was happy there, Lan Wangji felt he could be too. At least unlike his father he would do right by the person he loved.

He looked at Wei Wuxian again, hoping to meet his eyes but unfortunately his beloved was watching Wen Ruohan speak. Lan Wangji probably should have been paying more attention himself as he hadn't bothered to listen to who the two sect leaders Wen Ruohan was addressing were, but both looked unhappy with his decree. The Chief Cultivator managed to intimidate them enough however that they took their places, not prepared to argue further.

Wen Ruohan looked over the assembled sect leaders. "Are there any other issues to discuss?" No one stepped forward, and several people shook their heads. Wen Ruohan inclined his head, "Very well then, on to the most heinous crimes." He turned to Nie Mingjue. "Bring in Jin Guangshan."

Nie Mingjue waved a hand and the main doors to the hall opened, revealing Jin Guangshan being held by the arms by two particularly large Nie disciples. The normally proud man quaked like a terrified, shaking mouse as he was dragged forward. He narrowed his eyes as he looked him over. For all that he finally seemed to understand the amount of vitriol directed at him, something about him still seemed defiant.

It couldn't be his clothes, as his once fine gold robes were incredibly disheveled, streaked with dirt and blood from where he'd been injured earlier. A small part of him wondered why they hadn't done the man the courtesy of allowing him to change into fresh robes, but then he thought of the terrified women and children he and his brother had saved earlier. This suited him much better than how he normally looked.

Hmm, perhaps it was the way he still held his head straight even when forced to kneel before all the men once called his peers in his state? He didn't know. Perhaps he would ask Lan Xichen later, try to find a way to talk to his brother about the topic to take his mind off the elders a room over from them and the other decisions they would need to make soon. Not just about Lan Wangji's nuptials, but Lan Xichen's future in the sect. Brother would undoubtedly be unwilling to continue the charade, but to have any chance of properly seeing the elders punished brother would need to be acting sect leader.

Or they could just leave it a mess, which kept sounding better and better the more he contemplated it.

At the very least he intended to leave Lan Qiren's office and home a mess since he would be searching them for Wei Ying's letters. He'd be pleasantly surprised if he did not find them in his uncle's possession but had chosen to try and be more honest.

He took a sip of his tea and watched Wen Ruohan wave Meng Yao forward to recite the rough list of claims to avoid glaring at his Uncle.

To think the man who drilled into him that courtesy demanded he reply to every letter whether he liked the sender or not had confiscated the letters that Wei Ying wrote to him...

To think that Wei Ying wrote multiple letters even though Lan Wangji never replied...

His beloved truly was too good a person.

Lan Wangji looked forward to protecting that part of him for the rest of his life.

“-summary, we are reviewing thirty nine reports of rape, fifty four of behaving with impropriety, and seventy one claims of false promises to provide or provide other financial incentives. The number of children beget by Jin Guangshan is currently counted at sixty seven with several more claims still being verified. It should be noted however, that the talisman invented by Young Master Wei is limited in range, which combined with reports of the accused's behavior while traveling indicates that there are likely many more children and victims unaccounted for.”

After Meng Yao finished, the room burst into shouts of condemnation. Sect Leader Wen stood tall in the middle of the hall opposite Jin Guangshan, and if Lan Wangji was not mistaken, his Wei Ying's grandfather looked to be quite pleased with the experience.

“I have a proposal, Sect Leader Wen,” a female voice called out over the room. Lan Wangji turned with everyone else to see Madam Jin at the entrance of the hall, Jin Zixuan at her side, the Jin elders arrayed behind them, followed by the rest of the Jin leadership that had been missing all day. Rather than their usual, overly extravagant gaudy robes, they all wore plain white mourning robes.

None of them looked as repentant as Lan Wangji thought they should. It stood to reason that most of them knew exactly what their sect leader got up to and looked the other way. He pulled his hands into his lap to hide his fists clenching.

They were just like Lan elders. Like Uncle.

“So glad you could finally join us, Madam Jin,” Sect Leader Wen stated. “Your absence has been noted.”

Madam Jin bowed. “The Jin wanted to take the time to deliberate to ensure that our response was the correct one, Sect Leader Wen.”

Sect Leader Wen merely raised an eyebrow while the rest of the room once more burst into an annoying amount of noise. As always, none of them were actually saying anything worthwhile. The man let the commotion continue for several minutes before he gestured for silence. The move worked even better than a Lan silencing spell. “And what response did the Jin decide on?”

Madam Jin bowed again. “We believe that Wen Zhuliu is among your party?”

It took a moment for the words to sink in, and the room exploded in sound. “Quiet!” Wen Ruohan snapped. Just as immediately as it started the noise stopped.

Except for Jin Guangshan himself, who finally seemed to have lost his remaining hint of arrogance and he *begged*. “No- No! I'll do an-” Lan Wangji used a silencing spell to shut him up.

He had spoken more than enough in his lifetime. Wen Ruohan smiled quite happily as he nodded to them. “My thanks to the Lan,” he turned back to Madam Jin, who still held her bow. “He does happen to be here, but the loss of a Golden Core, though serious, does not

seem sufficient and offers no recompense to the victims. Additionally we still need to complete investigations into the rest of the corruption surrounding Jin Guangshan.”

“Quite, Sect Leader Wen. After the loss of his core, Jin Gaungshan will be supplanted by his heir, Jin Zixuan. Under his leadership, the Jin will arrange a procession of Jin Guangshan throughout the land announcing his crimes and testing for any additional children with the talisman. Once they have been identified, we will arrange for all of them to be brought under their brother’s care and provided for.”

Perhaps it was all the lies and twists of the last day, but Lan Wangji sincerely doubted that ‘care’ would be the right word to describe what would happen to any innocent child that entered Koi Tower.

“Who says all of them would want to join you?” Wei Ying called out. “What’s your plan if they don’t? Also, even if I was willing to give you a copy of the talisman, there isn’t a way to narrow it down to just Jin Guangshan’s blood, the exact same thing as today would happen.”

Lan Wangji could not help but want to comfort his love, he’d seen how downtrodden and upset he’d been at the exact consequences of his talisman earlier, though he really shouldn’t have been. The damage was caused by those who lied, cheated, and harmed the innocent. His Wei Ying had only brought their corruption into the light to be purified.

Lan Wangji tuned out the rest of the arguments, knowing that in between his love and his love’s grandfather, none would be harmed. Staring at his beloved’s face was a much better use of his time than listening to a bunch of people trying unsuccessfully to escape justice. The sooner he could stand beside his husband and help him protect the innocent, the happier he would be.

“Then it is agreed. Jin Guangshan will have his core melted, be gelded, and dragged from corner to corner on foot to identify and repent to as many of his victims as possible before his execution. Under the management of Meng Yao, Jin Guangshan’s fortune will be used to pay for the victims to be brought here for the test and then to return to their homes as desired. It will then be used to cover any promises or oaths he made to free women from hardship. The remaining funds will be split amongst his children so they can choose what futures they wish.” Wen Ruohan grinned sharply as he spoke, and Lan Wangji decided he liked how terrified the hypocritical, lying, unrighteous fools filling the room looked in response.

XxXxX

Wei Wuxian beamed as he cheered and waved at the latest batch of baby disciples careening through the racetrack on their swords. If they flew at a bit faster pace than they were truly steady with, well, it’d be a learning experience if they toppled off, especially since they weren’t that far from the ground.

This group had one of his Wen students, one of the Jiang, a Lan, and five kids from smaller sects. Han Ya hadn’t dropped from the lead since she’d taken it from the starting line, her adorable face scrunched up in concentration even as she gave an equally adorable Wen battle cry, although Xu Yunru in his Jiang purple wasn’t far behind. The Lan, Lan Feng, would probably be closer to the front of the pack if he wasn’t trying to look so proper. The rest of

the smaller sect's kids were putting on a decent showing, but the greater sect's ability to drill their junior disciples over and over meant they didn't have much hope of catching up unless one of the kids in front fell or something.

Wen Qing stood next to him, only instead of watching the race properly like he was, she seemed happy to not quite glare at where A-Ning and Shijie were sitting a row behind them chatting. Shijie had even gotten his incredibly shy friend to laugh a few times, which made Wei Wuxian cheer louder every time he heard it.

It felt so heartwarming when his favorite people got along.

"It looks like our sect will claim another victory due to your excellent teaching," Wen Xu said from beside him.

"Ah haha, A-Xu!" He smiled at his... at his uncle? It felt weird to call Wen Xu his uncle even in his own head. "Weren't you supposed to be at the poetry competition?" While the literary competitions weren't as cutthroat or as prominent compared to the martial competitions, they were still very well regarded. Well regarded enough in fact that Wen Xu, Jiang Cheng, and several of the other sect heirs and first disciples that should have been watching the youngsters flying competition had been sent to watch the poetry competition in place of any sect leaders that had still been caught up in side discussions.

While it was possible that the same would happen for calligraphy tomorrow, Wei Wuxian had a slightly foreboding feeling that the sect leaders would make that one. Given the shuffling of events that happened after the sudden schedule changes yesterday, the calligraphy competition was now after the children's sword racing final so Wei Wuxian would be competing in place of a Jiang disciple that had been injured trying to keep the peace. The talisman competition was still slated for right before the night hunting competition on the last day, and Wei Wuxian was seriously considering pulling out.

Best not to remind people of, you know, everything.

Really, things were already bad enough given that on top of everything yesterday the shell of the Xuanwu of Slaughter had finally arrived that morning during breakfast, and Wen Ruohan had arranged to have it displayed at the top of the steps of Koi Tower while he boasted of how Wen Xu, Wen Ning, and he defeated it. Ugh Jiang Cheng had punched his arm so hard it was still a little numb and Shijie had looked so torn between pride and worry that Wei Wuxian promised her he'd invent a talisman to give her real time updates on his health when night hunted. That had just made her frown, so he'd had to add that he'd integrate a teleportation talisman into it as well.

"Young Master Nie won again already and swanned off to find his brother so the crowd is letting out," Wen Xu said. "I think that Han Ya has a good chance of taking first place, but Xiao Huang is right up there with her."

Wei Wuxian smiled. Xiao Huang was another little Wen that had raced two rounds ago and completely outflown his competition. They both had another race this afternoon to make sure, but would likely end up in the finals given their times. "I think both will do really well! I'm so proud!" And he was. Even if they were Wens as opposed to Jiangs, the kids had made

huge strides in the past months and he was so happy they were no longer being kept back. All he could do was pray to any deity that was listening that their increased skill would only be used for night hunts to protect people. “Though there are several other kids that are keeping up with them!”

As a matter of fact, Xu Yunru had just pulled even and they crossed the finish line neck and neck. Wei Wuxian couldn’t help jumping up and down in excitement as he yelled for them. They were so perfectly cute! He kept cheering as the rest of the kids as they crossed the finish line too. How could he not when they’d all tried their hardest and were so adorable?

“If you enjoy games such as this, what do you think of hosting some for your birthday celebrations?” Wen Xu asked, and Wei Wuxian wanted to wail in despair and hide under the bench.

Last night before the discussion while Wen Ruohan and Wen Xu had both been inexplicably fussing over his robes for the thing, the Wen sect leader *his grandfather that was still so awkward* had actually scolded him for not reminding him of his birthday, and informed him that when his birthday came around in a few months that he’d throw a celebration worthy of it. Wei Wuxian, already out of sorts from everything that had happened and the fact that the servant sent to the Jiang about Wei Wuxian attending with the Jin had come back with a painfully placid response, could only nod stupidly.

“You’re holding a celebration for A-Xian’s birthday?” Shijie interjected brightly, leaning forward. “How wonderful! We never could celebrate it as much as I would have liked! Who is the hostess? I want to know all the details! Oh, and while I’m sure she’ll be lovely and agree, would you be so kind as to make sure they include his favorite soup and chili oil? I’ll make sure she gets the recipes but I know you’ll make sure he gets them!”

Wen Xu nodded. “Father has not decided on a hostess yet.” He tilted his head. “I don’t think he would be opposed if you would like to do the honors, Young Lady Jiang.”

“Besides, what’s stopping you from coming and making sure he gets it yourself?” Wen Qing asked, her eyes narrowed at the other young woman.

Shijie giggled a little, bowing her head and smiling. “Sect Leader Wen is certainly kind and understanding, but this humble one would never presume to host an event for a different sect! Especially as so much of the future is uncertain right now.”

“Ahh Shijie! It doesn’t matter what the future holds, your Xianxian’s birthday would not be complete without you! If you can’t be there I just won’t go!”

She, in a move she wouldn’t have made in public yesterday for fear of Madam Yu, leaned over and tapped his forehead. “Naughty Xianxian. If someone wants to honor you as you deserve, your Shijie would be so upset if you missed it. Plus it would be rude.”

“Shijie!” Wei Wuxian rubbed his head exaggeratedly and whined. “Be nice to your Xianxian, he’s only three!”

“As Xianxian is only three, he should listen to his Shijie,” she laughed brightly.

“If A-Xian is three, it is all the more reason you need to be at his birthday celebration to ensure it meets your standards for him,” Wen Xu said.

Wen Qing nodded, even though she was starting to look at Wen Xu suspiciously. Wei Wuxian couldn't help but do the same. Wen Xu, joining in on a joke? “Agreed, it would save us the work of acting as a go between. And if you're there you may as well act as hostess. I hate the job but there aren't that many other women around Sect Leader Wen that I would trust to do the job justice without trying to get a favor out of it.”

“I certainly hope that even if you decide not to host you will join us at the Nightless City for his birthday celebration, Young Lady Jiang,” Wen Xu said.

“Why are you so interested if she attends?” Wen Qing questioned Wen Xu pointedly, the suspicion in her eyes peaking.

“I intend to propose to Lady Jiang at a suitable time and after sending the appropriate gifts,” Wen Xu told Wen Qing bluntly.

Wei Wuxian still did not really know how to react to that, but before he could say anything to change the subject, Wen Qing pointed a finger accusingly at Wen Xu, a glare on her face. “She's too good for you, you'd never treat her right and then she'd be sad and that would make that idiot sad! I'm sending the Jiang a proposal for Wen Ning, they're much better suited!”

“Sister!” Wen Ning practically wailed, turning as red as his robes.

“Lady Wen!” Shijie stated, blushing prettily as she pulled out a fan to quickly hide her face behind.

“I saw her first, you harpy!” Wen Xu glared at Wen Qing.

“You obviously don't understand women if you think that's an argument that makes you worthy of her! Think things through, rock for brains!” Wen Qing snapped back, ignoring them too.

“I've obviously thought things through more than you! Being the future Madam Wen is obviously better than marrying into a branch family and spending all her time in a remote village!”

“Please, as someone who has to deal with the idiots around you, I can promise that my family is preferable company and much more suited to people like Lady Jiang and A-Xian both!”

“There is no way they'd be better company than me and Father! And while A-Xian will be teaching he'll still be spending most of his time in the Nightless City, so if Lady Jiang is there they'd obviously get to spend even more time together!”

Wei Wuxian could only stare in a stupor as Wen Xu and Wen Qing kept escalating their argument, completely dismissing their shocked silent audience. Because everyone in the

stands around them had stopped watching the field to gape at the two Wen powerhouses going at each other's throats over who Jiang Yanli would marry.

Which, you know, Wei Wuxian agreed with on principle. Shijie definitely deserved to be fought over.

But tha- "NIE HUAISANG!" Wei Wuxian quite happily spun away from Wen Xu and Wen Qing squaring up to really fight as Nie Mingjue's bellow distracted the crowd, Wen Xu's fingers inching towards his talismans as he called Wen Qing a sadistic bitch and Wen Qing's fingers slipping into her sleeves to where he knew she kept her needles as she retorted that Wen Xu was an emotionally stunted brat.

Maybe if he just didn't pay attention to them they'd calm down on their own.

That sounded like an absolutely great plan.

He scanned the area to the side of the stands where Nie Mingjue's shout had come from, and while he didn't immediately spot the gigantic sect leader, he did spot Nie Huaisang practically groveling next to what should have been a relatively unimportant storage tent.

Nie Mingjue, formal clothes more than a little rumpled and braids askew stormed out of the tent looking practically furious. He leaned a bit, trying to see into the tent to see what might have- "LAN XICHEN!"

Wei Wuxian, and everyone else, turned to where Lan Qiren was bearing down on the scene from an angle that let him see into the tent. Wei Wuxian, and basically everyone else gaped as Lan Xichen practically sauntered out of the tent after Nie Mingjue. The man appeared fairly smug for all that he looked like he'd just stumbled out of a brothel.

"Lan Qiren," Lan Xichen said, and Wei Wuxian almost gasped at the borderline rude tone, and actually gasped when Lan Xichen didn't tilt his head in the small respectful bow meant to show respect towards one's elders.

He hadn't watched Lan Xichen nearly as much as Lan Zhan while at Gusu, but he'd done it when he could. The Twin Jades really did look alike so it was fascinating to pick out the small differences and see how their opposing demeanors made their similar features appear unique. Studying them both had led him to many conclusions. The first and most important finding was that Lan Zhan was absolutely the handsomer of the two, but another one was that while Lan Zhan followed courtesies because he was supposed to, Lan Xichen followed courtesies because he was just that nice.

For him to still be behaving this rudely towards Lan Qiren...

He knew what Lan Zhan had told him yesterday, but it had to be more than just that. Something had to have been really, really wrong. Oh, poor Lan Zhan... Wei Wuxian really needed to do something to pay him back for causing so much trouble for his family.

Lan Zhan had seemed to focus on the lies his family had told him yesterday, so maybe a talisman to detect if someone was lying? He'd appreciate that, right? Or maybe one that



could differentiate between friend and foe? To remind him that even if things looked really dire, he still had people that loved him?

As Wei Wuxian ran through ideas in his head, Lan Xichen seemed content to hover relaxedly by Nie Mingjue's side as the terrifying sect leader glared daggers at his stuttering little brother rather than give Lan Qiren any face by replying further.

"I really didn't mean to, Dajie! How was I supposed to know you'd be doing that in there!" Nie Huaisang practically wailed. Wei Wuxian groaned at the burst of chatter that sparked in the surrounding crowd. He knew Nie Huaisang was smarter than this! Why would he make a scene about this!

"It is this humble one's fault, so this one will take responsibility," Lan Xichen stated before anyone else could speak up. He turned and bowed to Nie Mingjue, who'd looked to him from his cowering little brother to the Lan.

"What are you talking about?"

Lan Xichen just smiled at him. "Given the situation and your position as sect leader, it is only right that I renounce my position as heir of the Gusu Lan and marry into the Nie."

You could hear a hairpin drop in the silence that resulted from his words.

Well... shit.

That was certainly one way to extricate yourself from family drama.

"LAN XICHEN!" Lan Qiren shrieked again, his face turning an alarming shade of red.

Lan Xichen finally gave a proper bow to the man. "Lan Qiren, this one is certain his younger brother will be able to handle the role."

Wei Wuxian winced. Lan Zhan would certainly do his best, and like anything he tried for would undoubtedly succeed, but it wouldn't be a smooth path. Lan Zhan had the type of inflexible righteousness that wouldn't let him easily bend as he'd need to when dealing with other sects. With his current position as second young master, he could mostly get away with it as people took it as a sign of how upstanding he was. As a sect leader he'd be labeled intractable or difficult to work with at best.

And even when they married, Wei Wuxian's status-

His thoughts stuttered to a stop again.

Wait, hadn't Lan Zhan said yesterday that he'd... Marry into the Wen?

Leaving aside the fact that Wei Wuxian was still the first disciple of the Jiang, if Lan Xichen married out there was no way Lan Zhan could!

"This one offers his congratulations on your pending nuptials, brother," Lan Zhan stated from where he suddenly appeared next to his brother, giving him a deep, almost overly formal

bow. “Unfortunately this one will not be able to handle the role as circumstances have led to my engagement to Wei Wuxian, and I will be marrying into his family as I love him and that was part of the deal with Sect Leader Wen.” Lan Zhan turned to his uncle and gave the most minimally polite bow possible. “This one will need to leave leading the sect to you unless Qingheng-jun leaves seclusion as he must follow his heart as Lan An once did.”

Forget a pin dropping, you could hear a feather hit the ground.

“LAN ZHAN! YOU CAN’T SAY CHEESY STUFF LIKE THAT IN PUBLIC WITHOUT WARNING ME!” Wei Wuxian wailed as he buried his face in his hands and dropped to a crouch to avoid the flabbergasted looks from the unwitting audience.

It was so quiet he managed to hear Lan Zhan’s answering “mnh, will warn you next time,” even though he hadn’t been being loud at all. Wei Wuxian just wailed again. Forget anything else, he was developing a talisman that would let the ground swallow him. He was needing it way too often lately for it to not exist.

“A-Xian, should I wait until after your wedding to ask Lady Jiang to marry me again? Or are you okay if I ask her before?” Wen Xu asked seriously enough that Wei Wuxian felt the urge to cry into his hands. It was like Wen Xu’s words were an exploding talisman on a failing dam, and everyone around them burst into noise.

He didn’t even try to keep up with anything, it would all be horrible he just knew it.

“Like this fool knows marriage customs any better than you?” Wen Qing spat at Wen Xu. “And Jiang Yanli deserves someone much nicer than you! You deserve the pit vipers at court! A-Xian, don’t worry, I’ll send an appropriate betrothal request to Lady Jiang for Wen Ning when the time is right!”

“I can be perfectly nice! And if she marries me she wouldn’t need to have a harpy like you as a sister-in-law!”

“Oh please! Tell me what appropriate betrothal gifts are without asking one of your advisors, you romantically deficitant baboon!”

Wei Wuxian picked his head up enough to eye the two Wen elders assigned to be his chaperones, trying to decide if they were distracted enough he could slip them to drag Lan Zhan into a dark corner of their own in order to elope and go live on a rabbit farm somewhere.

They smiled brightly at him.

Yeah, nope.

Nope.

Maybe he could get Meng Yao to help him when he wasn’t so busy.

XxXxX

A wedding thrown with just under a month of planning didn't count as the quickest engagement Wen Ruohan had ever seen in general, but it was up there. However such speed was practically unheard of when it came to a sect leader and a sect heir that was a former acting sect leader. Not that Nie Mingjue or Lan Xichen looked particularly upset at the haste. If anything, Qingheng-Jun looked more perturbed than either of the grooms, but that might just be the fact that he likely didn't recognize most of the attendees and was still adjusting to being around people again. Afterall, the world changed and grew when you'd been hiding in a hut in the hills ignoring your responsibilities for so many years. Wen Ruohan smiled as he remembered gleefully reading the report of the man being forcibly dragged out of seclusion three days ago to take his place as sect leader again.

Those Lan brothers certainly didn't waste any time when they finally decided to move.

He sipped his wine to hide the smirk as he pictured the image included in the report of Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji practically throwing the man into the middle of an aghast group of elders. He really needed to give Meng Yao another raise for that particular improvement to his intelligence gathering and how skillfully he had manipulated Wei Wuxian into creating the talisman to instantly capture images like that.

His grandson still thought he'd developed it just as a thank you to Wen Ruohan for everything he did to help with the clean up after his grandson revealed his parentage talisman. Meng Yao had apparently given him the idea when Wei Wuxian had been asking around for opinions, pitching it as a way for Wen Ruohan to have better family portraits. He'd quite happily taken advantage of the talisman technique to do just that to distract his grandson from it being disseminated to his most trusted spies.

It had given him more than a little entertainment to actually see his enemies scrambling like fools when he couldn't be there to watch in person. He even had an enlarged copy of the image of Jiang Fengmian crying while taking his bitch of a wife's other hand framed and hanging in his personal room next to the portrait of him, his son, and grandson the day that Wei Wuxian left the Jiang and officially joined the Wen. He'd debated dragging his still recovering second son out to be in the picture, but decided that would just ruin it. Wen Chao apparently spent most of his days whining and doing little to improve his competency as opposed to his actually competent descendant who provided endless entertainment and joy.

Because the fallout from Wei Wuxian's parentage talisman was still ongoing with several sects having changeovers in leadership and multiple border skirmishes happening in spite of the restrictions laid out at the conference. The number of concessions Wen Ruohan had been able to gain by sending his people to resolve things were breathtaking.

They'd even received so many purchase requests for the parentage talisman from mundane rulers wanting to confirm the parentage of their heirs that he'd be able to pave the entire Nightless City in gold if he wanted to. The fact that none of these rulers seemed to care about the collateral damage to their courts or people was just sugar dusting on the rice cake! A few public words about being cautious, some well placed yes men and cultivators in place to prevent the worst of the damage and the amount of influence he'd be able to bring to bear in the non-cultivation world...

He really shouldn't wait until Wei Wuxian's birthday to throw that bitch's hands and Jin Zixun's head into the volcano. He didn't want to do it on just any day though, it needed the right amount of gravitas and celebration.

Perhaps he should do it the day of his grandson's wedding to Lan Wangji in a month?

The date could definitely be counted as related, after all.

Thanks to Meng Yao, who found out from several serving women that Jin Guangshan raped who happened to see their strands while fully colored, Wen Rouhan had been informed that the famous Twin Jades of Lan were in fact half brothers. He'd known from how they behaved immediately after that something had been wrong. Thinking back, there'd been rumors about why their mother never left the Cloud Recesses and the death of an honored teacher, but to think something so unrighteous would be the cause!

Delightful!

It also explained why Lan Xichen rushed to marry out and contributed to Lan Wangji putting his foot down about not trying to renegotiate around the verbal agreement they'd made in the garden. If anything, he seemed even more ready to elope than Wei Wuxian, who had barely agreed to the two month timeframe for his wedding to give time for Lan Xichen to be wed first as per protocol and for the appropriate ceremonies for his own wedding to be put in place.

He'd had to triple the number of chaperones on Wei Wuxian, and even they hadn't been enough since it was only luck Wen Xu had caught his grandson and his betrothed halfway through their first bow not even a quarter of a shichen after Lan Xichen and Nie Mingjue finished theirs. Luckily they took the interruption with relatively good grace and had stayed in their very separate seats the rest of the night.

Watching them moon over each other provided its own amusement, he supposed. Especially given how prickly the Lan's were in general with their still ongoing drama.

The Jin on the other hand...

He took another sip of his wine to disguise his smile.

Oh the Jin...

Not only were they no longer counted as a great sect, they hadn't even been invited to this wedding and wouldn't be able to join any type of event for years to come.

In between his spy network, the army of treasury and tax experts Wen Ruohan had been preparing, general gossip, and Wei Wuxian deciding to poke around in order to ditch his chaperones, they'd uncovered an exorbitant amount of wealth that the Jins had squirreled away. He didn't know for sure whether to attribute Jin stupidity or the skill of his people that it only took three days after Jin Guangshan's being sentenced to dig out most of the hidden treasure rooms, businesses, and safe houses in Jinlantai. By the time the discussion conference ended and all the sects went home, Koi Tower had been a shell of itself being

swiftly readied to be put to auction and more than a few of the more prominent businesses in the area had been raided.

While he'd happily passed most of the spoils out to other sects and Jin Guangshan's victims, Wen Ruohan had acquired several treasures including a rather gorgeous set of transportation mirrors he intended to give to Wei Wuxian for his birthday. Undoubtedly his grandson would have them reverse engineered and improved then added to the Wen sect arsenal soon after.

On top of that, due to their greatly reduced stations and not having the hidden wealth she'd likely been banking on, following the death of most of their 'prominent' cultivators on night hunts they were in fact ill prepared for shortly after, Madam Jin had been reduced to fleeing to her natal sect, the Yu quite quickly. To her credit she'd tried to take her son with her, however in between his father's reputation and the letters Wen Ruohan had already sent them to try and learn more about his love's family the peacock had been refused entrance. His mother, unwilling to give up even her childhood home, turned away Jin Zixuan reducing him to a pauper begging for a place in other sects.

It didn't have quite the same effect of staking the brat in the middle of Koi Tower as it burned, but it did have a certain amount of poetry to it. He just needed to make sure his grandson stayed well away from the brat so he didn't start pitying him since he had rather lenient opinions on familial responsibility.

His upcoming wedding and increased duties would surely keep him busy. Not to mention how much of his time was consumed by keeping Wen Xu and Wen Qing from coming to blows over Jiang Yanli's hand. He eyed the Young Lady in question seated at the head table for the Jiang contingent. Their party for the Nie-Lan wedding was headed by her and her brother instead of their father, who was currently engaged in trying to save several of their trade agreements.

It hadn't taken nearly as much as he'd thought to get those merchants to demand something be done about Madam Yu before they continued to do business with the Jiang. Meng Yao had reported that the vile woman's attitude soured many relationships the riverbound sect needed to thrive, but he hadn't realized how much that had been an understatement.

Whatever Jiang Fengmian's feelings might be, keeping his children legitimate was likely the only reason stopping him from divorcing Madam Yu. And she wasn't exactly making that an easy thing. His spies reported that rather than taking her current situation as an opportunity to improve, her spewed vitriol and anger was escalating.

If it wouldn't be too mercifully quick, he'd arrange for her to have a qi deviation.

Still the problem would need to be solved soon as Wen Xu decided he found Jiang Wanyin entertaining and kept dragging him to do things with him, Wei Wuxian, and Wen Qionglin, and Jiang Yanli would soon be joining the family through marriage. It just wouldn't do to have family problems impacting the smooth integration of them into the Wen.

XxXxX

Wen Ruohan settled back in his chair as he watched his grandson. The boy hadn't stopped beaming the whole evening, more glorious than the sun itself in his gold embroidered red wedding robes. The gold chains with delicate decorations and bells that dangled from his crown paled in comparison to the wild, uninhibited laughter that poured from him freely.

The brilliant Wen suns prominently featured in everything from his jewelry, to his robes, to the cinnabar huadian that a gleeful Jiang Yanli had painted on his forehead only made his happiness even better. Not even the teasing from Wen Xu and Jiang Wanyin about looking like a bride could dim the boy's joy. There weren't many traditions for cutsleeve joinings so A-Xian picked out what he liked with Jiang Yanli, Wen Qing, and Wen Qionglin egging him on and A-Xu helping Wen Ruohan arrange improvements so things would actually be worthy of him.

A-Xian deserved to have his dream wedding after all, even if the event needed to be rushed forward at an almost unseemly pace in order to prevent his grandson from dragging his betrothed off to elope like he kept threatening to every time a wedding date too far away for his liking or the politics of the situation were mentioned. Perhaps he should have used it as a moment to drill patience into his grandson, but Wen Ruohan didn't want A-Xian to ever feel like he had when he learned that his beloved had needed to flee to an Immortal's mountain, leaving him behind.

No. His grandson deserved to get everything that made him happy as soon as he could get it. Besides, the rush had nearly driven Lan Qiren mad with rage which granted Wen Ruohan immeasurable amusement. Even now the stuffed up ponce looked ready to scream at the way Lan Wangji kept fawning over A-Xian, though he'd at least managed to accept his tea relatively calmly during the ceremony. He'd felt rather pleasant amount of petty vindication at the fact the man lost control of both his younger relatives given how he'd treated Wen Rouhan's grandson.

Truly, watching Lan Qiren stew in silence next to his brother felt incredible. Almost as incredible as the chests of gold and jade along with the gritted teeth apology from the stuffed pigeon of a man that accompanied them in response to his formal complaint about the interference with his grandson's mail and the boy's treatment while he'd attended the Gusu Lan lectures, complete with a list of evidence.

Qingheng-jun had actually looked dismayed at his brother's actions when Wen Ruohan had told him. Considering what their spies had told him of the turmoil going on behind the scenes in Cloud Recesses he didn't know why the man was surprised, but perhaps he'd thought his younger brother better than that. After all, Lan Qiren was incredibly well respected in all sects as a righteous man and fair and just educator.

Not like it would matter what type of educator he was soon since he'd be relegated to just instructing the Lan brats themselves. Wen Ruohan had finalized the curriculum of guest lectures he would be hosting come summer, and the inquiries he'd made last night during the welcome feast for his guests resulted in a large number of acceptances.

To ensure that he'd avoid the pitfalls the Lan fell into with their curriculum, he'd even arranged to have experts from various sects lead one off talks. Not only would it encourage

additional attendees, he'd be able to see which ones were really deserving of their reputations and recruit them.

It was all lining up so that the next generation of Lan wouldn't be anywhere near as impressive as the next generation of Wen. The years of Wen Ruohan having numbers on his side but not particularly impressive individual cultivators was over, he thought smugly as he watched his grandson detour once more to Wen Qing's table, his husband trailing dutifully behind him. At the table sat her and Wen Ning's great aunt, and more importantly to Wei Wuxian, the old woman's two tiny grandchildren. Wei Wuxian had fallen in love with Wen Xiurong and Wen Yuan the moment he'd seen them one time when he'd visited Dafan with Wen Ning to get away from the wedding planning, and the two children rightfully adored him back. The four month old Wen Yuan, in fact, only ceased crying when held by either his grandmother or Wei Wuxian, and it was truly heartwarming to see how that melted Wei Wuxian's own heart.

While never one to really celebrate a relative's death, Wen Ruohan considered it a lucky thing that the children's parents were already dead, their father killed in a night hunt and their mother dying while birthing Wen Yuan, as it eased the talks for the two to be adopted by his grandson.

Not that his grandson knew the talks were happening as the adoption would be a surprise for his birthday next month. It killed two birds with one stone, giving him not only the best present but two cute great-grandchildren.

He'd still push for Wei Wuxian to take Lady Zhao Jiaying as a second wife in order to get more of his own blood, but the two children were delightful and Wei Wuxian loved them, so he was more than happy to welcome them to his family. Additionally to his pleasant surprise, rather than giving up due to boredom or being invested only to thwart Wen Qing, Wen Xu still seemed genuine in his pursuit of Jiang Yanli so he might actually get more grandchildren and great grandchildren from him.

Even if his suit failed, which it might as Wen Qing had gone all in on convincing Jiang Yanli to marry Wen Ning instead, the idea of a marriage and all that it entailed no longer seemed completely anathema to his son.

If Wen Ruohan's original plans for Wen Ning and Jiang Yanli bore fruit, he was sure he could find another woman his son would like enough to marry, and if they didn't, he'd set his new daughter-in-law to the task of finding someone Wen Qing would approve of for Wen Ning. He'd come out on top no matter which of his relatives Young Lady Jiang decided to marry, so he wisely stayed out of their little spat.

Besides the two sniping at each other made excellent dinner entertainment.

Why, a few nights ago a series of particularly vicious insults had made even Wen Zhuliu snort into his wine cup.

For the first time in many a year, all the people he wanted around him were right where they should be. They glowed with happiness and their futures were bright.

Wen Ruohan found himself content.

XxXxX

“Would you... Would you please tell me about my grandmother?” Wen Ruohan looked up from contemplating the last few details he wanted to add to his latest cultivation manual. A-Xian sat sipping his tea in the lounge next to his window that Wen Rouhan had placed there just for him. A-Yuan dozed peacefully in his arms while A-Rong slept with her gangly limbs sprawled out, taking up all of the lounge her newly adopted baba didn’t. The sounds of Xu-er and Wangji sparring in the courtyard below drifted up to them through the open window.

He smiled.

“Her name was Dai Qiaolian.”

## Chapter End Notes

Well, this felt ridiculous and OOC at points, but I wanted to indulge a little.

On the Lans, I can’t remember if ‘Do not interact with Wei Wuxian/Interacting with Wei Wuxian is forbidden.’ as an actual, carved on the wall rule was canon or just fanon, but I decided to have it carved right after classes to fit in with the theme of Lan Qiren and the Lan elders controlling the younger generations and who had influence over them, but it’s probably wrong since if it was canon it’s likely post sunshot campaign.

I tried to balance out a bit of the approximate social reality of the time/setting with my modern western viewpoint of morality for Madam Lan. I hope it kind of made sense since I also wanted to display some of the canon Lan/upper class hypocrisy in regards to ‘righteous’ behavior.

For Madam Yu, my half hearted research gave me the impression that if Jiang Fengmian divorced her, it would be like a modern annulment where the marriage legally never happened except with an extra heaping of shame on MY. Since that might cause a succession concern with Jiang Cheng, JF would take time to consider that. Also if WRH had JF kill MY for the insult that’d cause bad blood between the clans and Wei Wuxian, despite being won over at this point is still such a bleeding heart that he didn’t want to alienate him. Therefore while WRH will continue to push and ultimately see MY and JF dead, it’ll be more subtle than his initial burn everything to the ground plan.

As always please let me know if there is anything I missed or got it horribly wrong, C&C are always welcome.

Anyway, thank you to everyone who stuck with this fic and kept commenting. At the risk of being too serious, there were some days rereading everyone’s nice comments or the little burst of happy surprise at a new one gave me the boost I desperately needed. Life just kept kicking when I was down starting with my grandparents dying and getting



worse. Things are still pretty rocky and I'm in a very different position than when I started this fic, so I hope I was able to keep this as upbeat as I wanted it to be.

I hope it was enjoyable and at least partially worth the wait.

Works inspired by this one

[You're My Dad \(Boogie Woogie Woogie\)](#) by [Eternal\\_writes](#)

[New Dawn](#) by [sifshadowheart](#)

[Restricted Work] by [Ariana Deralte \(ArianaDeralte\)](#)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!